

**Re-Constructing Children's Identities:  
Social work knowledge and practice  
in the assessment of children's identities.**

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**This thesis is submitted in candidature for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

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**April 2010**

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## **Acknowledgments**

I am very grateful for the academic guidance of my two supervisors Dr. Sally Holland and Professor Andrew Pithouse. Both offered me encouragement and support throughout the process and have provided me with constructive and at times challenging advice.

My sincere gratitude is also extended to all the children, parents and carers and practitioners who took part in this study and who gave their time and their views so freely.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their patience and support.



## Summary

This thesis is an exploration of how social work practitioners learn about and assess children's identities within the Core Assessment process contained within the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families*. A qualitative case study was conducted within one childcare team in a local authority in South Wales with participation from key stakeholders involved in the assessment process: practitioners, parents, carers, and the subject children. Thirteen social work practitioners and eleven parent/carers participated in semi-structured interviews that explored what they understood identity to mean together with their appraisals of assessments of children's identities. Access to children was gained with consent of the parent/carers, with ten children taking part in a multi-method research strategy aimed at ascertaining children's own accounts of their identities. Core Assessment documents and interview data were analysed utilising textual analysis. The data from the children has been reproduced, wherever possible, verbatim to ensure their voices are made prominent within the study. The key findings are that the assessment of children's identities is an intricate, iterative task that poses practitioners with considerable practical and moral issues. Practitioners appear to utilise artistry in their management of the assessment task, commonly not making explicit the sources upon which their assessments of children's identities are based. It would appear that practitioners prefer to present their assessments of children's identities in the form of a narrative account, of which ownership of the details remains very much in the hands of the practitioner. Within this thesis subtle yet important differences between how practitioners, parents, carers and children construct identities is unearthed. It is posited that practitioners' assessments of children's identities do not reflect the individuality of the child and the reasons for this are explored. Also the adequacy of the Assessment Framework as a tool for assessing children's identities is questioned. It is suggested that the Assessment Framework restricts practitioners' assessments of children's identities to little more than constrained accounts of *any child*: thus ignoring the uniqueness of the subject children. It is demonstrated that in using the Assessment Framework, practitioners often struggle to employ their own nuanced knowledge of the subject child.

The complexities practitioners encounter in managing the task of assessment is considered. Some practitioners appear to invoke some sense of the fluidity and subjectivity of identities, suggesting an appreciation that there may be many different ways to perceive another. Other practitioners assert some singular and *true* identity that should be unearthed through the assessment process. More generally, the thesis reveals that practitioners typically construct children's identities within the familiar framework of developmental and object-relational theories. The implications of this for children to be constructed as passive objects, whose identities are seen as more simplistic, less sophisticated than adult identities, is critically examined. The limits and potential of contemporary assessment practices with regard to children's identities is also explored. It is suggested that greater inclusion of the views of parents, carers and subject children in assessment is needed if practitioners are to move away from a constrained re-construction of children's identities and to present instead accounts that more authentically reflect the individual identities of the subject children.

## **List of tables and figures.**

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Table 1: Details of the practitioners</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Table 2: Age of subject children at time of assessment</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>Table 3: Parent/carer interview composition</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>Table 4: Ages of child research participants</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Table 5: Methods with children</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Table 6: Photographs within photo diaries</b>	<b>228</b>
<b>Figure 1: The Assessment Framework Triangle</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Figure 2: Case study data sources</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Figure 3: The process of individualisation to standardisation</b>	<b>246</b>
<b>Figure 4: The Scottish Government's 'My World' Assessment Triangle</b>	<b>251</b>

# Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements	i
Summary	ii
List of tables, figures and charts	iii

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Introducing the research focus	1
Locating the research	3
Social constructionism and social work	3
The research setting	6
Assessment procedures	6
Structure of the thesis	10

## Chapter 2: Discursive interpretations on the meaning of children and childhoods

Introduction	13
Childhood as a social construction	14
The re-telling of old tales: the thematic discourses of childhood	16
The romantic/innocent child discourse	17
The discourse of the Puritan child	21
The discourse of <i>tabula rasa</i>	26
The Children's Rights discourse	29
The Quality of Life framework	32
Summary	35

## Chapter 3: Theorising Identities

Introduction	36
Theory in practice	36
Social work theory as a social construction	39
Applying identity theory to practice	41
Multiple identities? The concept of a multiplicity of selves	43
Incremental identities? The concept of a developing sense of self	46
Identity and social interaction	48
Object relations: The concept of relationality	51
Identities in attachment theory	54
The social organisation of identities: The concept of roles	56
Summary	59

## **Chapter 4: Contemporary themes in assessment practice**

Introduction	60
Practitioners' use of the Assessment Framework	60
The ambiguity of 'assessment'	64
The use of knowledge and evidence in assessments	68
Inter-agency work in assessments	72
Assessment work with (and without) clients	75
Summary	77

## **Chapter 5: Methodology**

Introduction	78
Epistemological position of the enquiry	78
Choosing the research method	80
Gaining access and the sampling process	83
Ethical issues and confidentiality	86
Sample characteristics: The assessment documents	87
Sample characteristics: The practitioners	88
Sample characteristics: The subject children	89
Sample characteristics: Parents and carers	90
Gaining access to children and gaining children's continued consent	91
Research and analysis methods	92
Textual analysis of the documents	93
Verbal constructions of identities - The interviews	97
Checking and clarifying: The use of questionnaires	100
Promoting Competence - Multi-methods with Children	100
Photo diaries	105
Who knows me best?	105
What I know about my social worker/what my social worker knows about me	105
A story about me	106
My ideal social worker	106
Interviews	106
Drawings	107
Re-presentation of views and feedback	108
Summary	109

## **Chapter 6: The artful construction of identities as an assessment task**

Introduction	111
The value of narrative	111
The use of information in assessments of identities	113
Locating sources of information	118
<i>'Its about getting into the real environment': Building on the mundane and intimate</i>	120
The multiplicity of identities - Balancing different perspectives of the child	122
Theorising identities – Using theory in assessment	127
Constructing relational identities: Attachment as a proxy for identity	128
Socio-genealogical connectedness – <i>the concept of coherence</i>	131
Social learning theory – <i>the concept of role modelling</i>	134
Practitioners use of theory as 'fact'	135
Summary	136

## **Chapter 7: The routinisation of identities as an assessment task**

Introduction	138
Practitioners' use of practice guidance in assessments of children's identities	138
Hidden complexity: Identity as a fluid and malleable concept	143
Identity as a discrete assessment domain	147
The routinisation of children's identities within assessments	148
Proxies for the interpretation of identities	149
Familial identities as proxies to individual identities	149
Depicting familial relationships	154
Self-esteem as a proxy for identities	156
Practitioners' discretion in the assessment of children's self-esteem	159
The legitimisation of identity construction	163
Summary	163

## **Chapter 8: Constructing Childhood Identities**

Introduction	165
The oppositional dichotomy between childhood and adulthood identities	165
Childhood as the origin of national identity	168
Religious/spiritual identity	175
The impact of parenting experience on children's identities	178
The impact of Children's Services intervention on children's identities	182
Summary	185

## **Chapter 9: “And I felt like screaming then, ‘this is my child. This is what he is like.’” Parent and carers’ narratives about identity**

Introduction	186
“I wasn’t listened to at all”: The exclusion of parental/carer views	186
“I’m a bit confused really, identity and all that business, what do they mean?”	
Parent/carers understandings of identity	189
“Well he’s certainly got a negative identity hasn’t he? Bless him!”	
Parent/carer views on the representation of their child(ren)	193
“She don’t know him as well as we do”: Factors influencing how parent/carers view practitioner’s knowledge of the child	197
“I mean it’s really about who the assessment is for...” The multiple audiences of assessment	202
Summary	208

## **Chapter 10: “My identity is about all the things that make me special” Children’s constructions of their own identities**

Introduction	210
“I think how a child sees itself is the most important thing”: Children as a source of information	210
Telling their own stories: Children as narrators	217
Potential barriers to children as narrators	220
“This is a picture of Chester and a whale...” Employing children’s creativity	223
Friendships and self: Identity, association and disassociation	226
Morality in assessments of children’s identities	230
Summary	233

## **Chapter 11: Re-Constructing Identities – Conclusions and Implications for Practice**

Introduction	235
Key Findings:	235
“Identity is a minefield, isn’t it?” The hidden complexities in assessing identities	235
The existence of uncertainty	240
The troubling position of identity within the Assessment Framework	244
Further barriers to recognising and rejoicing individuality	247
Enabling children’s self-representations	249
Recognising childhood identities	252
Findings - limitations and suggestions for further research	255

<b>Bibliography</b>	257
<b>Appendix 1:</b> Example of an identity section	299
<b>Appendix 2:</b> Service User Participant Information Pack	300
<b>Appendix 3:</b> Assessment period duration (as recorded on assessment document)	303
<b>Appendix 4:</b> Generic Practitioner Interview Schedule	304

# Chapter One

## Introduction

### Introducing the research focus

Children are not ‘little adults’ and need particular support both as children, and for the particular condition or situation they find themselves in at any given moment in time. Within central government, the Department of Health, Ministry of Justice and Home Office, as departments with key safeguarding responsibilities, must recognise *children as individuals* with their own needs and ensure that their delivery strategies and services are appropriate and well equipped for the task.  
(Laming 2009: 14, point 2.2. Emphasis added.)

The above extract from Lord Laming’s report on the progress made in safeguarding children in England since the recommendations of the Climbiè Inquiry (Laming 2003) recognises a prevailing tendency in safeguarding practices to fail to acknowledge the individuality, and uniqueness, of children in need of provisions and/or protection<sup>1</sup>. And it is this tendency to overlook the individual identities of the children who are subject to involvement from Children’s Services that forms a central argument within this thesis.

Following the implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998 and Lord Laming’s (2003) recommendations there has been a growing demand for the citizenship and integrity of children to be recognised and of the need for the ‘child’ to be returned to the forefront of child protection matters. Attempts have been made to ensure that the child is central to all childcare tools and techniques, the *National Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (National Assembly for Wales 2001a; referred to in this thesis as the Assessment Framework) being one example. However to what extent children’s individual identities are recognised within childcare social work remains debatable. This thesis explores this issue by examining practitioners’ use of the Assessment Framework in assessing children’s identities within one specific area of Child Protection procedures, the Core Assessment

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<sup>1</sup> This extract is, however, the only reference within Lord Laming’s report that acknowledges children as individuals.



(National Assembly for Wales 2001b)<sup>2</sup>. Within this thesis the knowledge base, tools of assessment and analytical methods of social work professionals will be examined in an attempt to identify how practitioners construct a child's identities in their day-to-day work and to consider the implications of this in how individual children, and childhoods, are perceived within contemporary child care social work.

Understanding identities is not an easy task. Within this thesis I demonstrate how a number of key stakeholders in assessment work – the children, their parent and carers and the practitioners – perceive identities for children, highlighting subtle yet important differences between their constructions of children's identities. From a social constructionist viewpoint, in which this thesis is grounded, our identities shift and change as a result of our own personal experiences and life events and in this sense identity is not something that is simply innate or inherited, but rather it is learned and acquired. Of course, our gender, ethnicity, class, and ability contribute to shaping our identities and we also engage in some self-actualisation in that, as Hall (1992) points out, the very act of identifying ourselves as one thing simultaneously distances us from being something, or someone, else. Thereby, identities are not just attributed; they can be negotiated and managed as Goffman (1968b) has amply explored. It is thus important for practitioners to highlight the complexity and the often-confounding aspects within identity formation, particularly in children, for to ignore this is to ignore the child's individuality.

My own recent experience of front-line statutory child care services has shown me how children's unique identities and individualities can readily become lost within the system. All too often I have read case files, and specifically Looked After Children (LAC) documentation where a practitioner has recorded within the identity section '*not applicable*'. Clearly practitioners are often working under extreme pressure and the temptation to disregard a child's identities appears to be difficult to resist. However when, and how, it did become acceptable for practitioners' to discount a child's identities as '*not applicable*'? In understanding this phenomenon, this thesis unearths the complex and iterative processes of engagement and elucidation, under the Assessment Framework, that acts to often transform practitioner's nuanced and

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<sup>2</sup> Appendix 1 provides an example of a completed identity section from one of the Core Assessments in the data set.

intimate knowledge of the subject child(ren) into routinised accounts of *any* child: revealing the bureaucratic notion of the 'standardised child' (White 1998: 269). In short, my hypothesis is that social work professionals require reflective and critical knowledge of identity development, accompanied by high quality tools and techniques, if they are to truly represent the children with and for whom they are working. This thesis seeks to assist in that ambition.

### **Locating the research**

The act of researching a particular phenomenon is in itself a social construction. The research focus, location, theoretical position and interests of the researcher, and epoch in which the research is undertaken all influence the research process. As such reflection is required as to how these act to shape the research. In brief, I now consider the theoretical ideas underpinning this thesis before considering the physical location of the research setting and the structural location of assessment work in practice; the foci of the study.

### **Social constructionism and social work**

The underlying principles of social constructionism as stated by Burr (2003) are (i) a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge (ii) the historical and cultural specificity of our ways of knowing (iii) the belief that knowledge is sustained by social processes and (iv) that knowledge and social action go together. Within this framework our common-sense understanding of the world, and ourselves, is questioned; we construct our 'truth' or reality from what we take from our interactions with one another. As no set of social interactions is exactly alike (we act and present ourselves differently according to the social situation in which we find ourselves) this opens the possibility for there to exist a number of versions of 'truth' and a number of versions of the self, of our identities. From a social constructionist perspective identities are therefore not an essential, innate entity within the individual, but are derived from our interactions with others – an idea originally presented by William James ([1890] 1950 also see Hall 1992; Sen 1999). As we shape our identities from our interactions with one another, we shape different identities. We construct a multiplicity of selves, in that our interactions with, for example, our child would be different from our interactions with, say, our child's social worker. Thereby, how we present ourselves, and are perceived by others, will be socially, culturally and

historically specific – dependent on how, who, where and when we interact with others. As our interactions with others are socially, culturally and historically specific, so too are the discourses available from which our identities are formed (i.e., the Victorian discourse of ‘a child’ would be very different from contemporary western discourses of a child in late modernity)<sup>3</sup>. As such, it is important from a social constructionist perspective to explore how children, and their identities, are constructed within the assessment process, for assessment work itself is social construction in practice.

In recent years there has been much academic interest in the application of social constructionist ideas to social work education, research and practice (see for example, Witkin 1991; Laird 1993; Rodwell 1998; Jokinen *et al.* 1999; Parton and O’Byrne 2000; Taylor and White 2000; D’Cruz 2004). Coupled with this growth of interest, increasingly there appears an acceptance that social work is a socially constructed activity (Department of Health 1995; Payne 2005). As Houston (2001) argues, social constructionism has now replaced the traditional ‘received ideas’ that seek to describe and account for social work’s humane project to become in Rojek *et al.*’s (1988) terms, the new ‘doxa’ or orthodoxy in theorising the ways in which practice is accomplished. The purpose of this study, itself part of the growing body of constructionist informed research in social work, is not to debate the aetiology or epistemological value of this movement, but rather to employ social constructionist principles in analysing social work practices to determine how practitioners construct children’s identities. In attempting to answer this question it is pertinent to examine the relevance of a social constructionist stance to the task at hand.

Payne (1999) usefully highlights a number of advantages in the application of social constructionist ideas to social work. Firstly, as a social theory, social constructionism positions social work within the ‘social’ realm of society (Donzelot 1980). Secondly, social constructionism offers a system of analysis that emphasises the interpersonal construction (through language and social interaction) of identities, social problems, successes and reality. As such, it is a theory that encompasses both the social and

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<sup>3</sup> Chapter 2 explores how discourses help us to understand what ‘a child’ means in our time and culture and that there can be many meanings contained in a discourse which facilitate, or perhaps limit, children’s own understandings of their identities.

individual aspects of social work. Thirdly, the dialectical nature of social constructionist analysis encourages reflexivity, negotiation and uncertainty by problematising taken-for-granted assumptions about 'truth', 'rights' and 'wrongs'. Because of this dialectical nature, the client is seen as central to an understanding of '*what is going on*' thus promoting client participation in the pivotal social work process of constructing identities. That said, Payne (1999:54) identifies areas of weakness in the application of social construction in social work. As he notes, 'not only does it [social constructionism] fail to offer possibilities for action and purpose, it inherently sets it face against action and purpose'. Thus, the most appropriate application of social construction in social work may be as a method of critique (see Parton 2000) rather than as a theory of practice in action. It is perhaps pertinent, with this in mind, to turn to Parton and O'Byrne's (2000) model of *constructive social work* to consider further the application of social constructionism to social work practice.

Applying the principles of social constructionism to social work and reflecting upon their application in key sources (see England 1986; Siporin 1988; Goldstein 1990), Parton and O'Byrne (2000) conceptualise their model of *constructive* practice as more creative than prescriptive and as a practical-moral activity rather than a rational-technical one. A key idea in Parton and O'Byrne's model is that practitioners abandon the stance of knowing (e.g., 'Now I know what your problem is') and privilege the creation of collaborative dialogues (e.g. 'Shall we explore what meaning this problem has for you?'). In other words, practitioners engage with clients in an 'interpersonal construction process' (Fruggeri 1992: 48) that may generate new options and possibilities for thoughts, meanings, feelings and actions (D'Cruz 2004). Within this model *uncertainty* is seen as central, for, as Taylor and White (2006) argue making certainty out of uncertainty glosses over the ways in which both knowledge and practice often propel practitioners towards early and certain judgements when a position of 'respectful uncertainty' might be more appropriate. However, we must remain mindful that although 'respectful uncertainty' may be a social work ideal, social work operates under a political and organisational climate that demands certainty (Smith 2001). Thereby, there may be organisational barriers which act to prevent more reflective enquiries into understanding the client's viewpoint, thereby restricting the opportunities for practitioners to encompass the client's cultural,

familial and individual belief structures (Pozatek 1994). As such, the possibilities for constructing more complex and revealing identities for clients that a position of uncertainty may provide can be restricted by the organisational culture in which practitioners operate.

### **The research setting**

This research has been conducted in a generic child care social work team in one local authority in South Wales. Geographically the local authority consists primarily of rural villages, but a considerable amount of the agency's work is located within two urban communities within the locality. For the purpose of this thesis the study team will be referred to as the 'locality team' and is based in the second tier of a two tier organisational approach to intervention. This means that service users first encounter the agency's 'intake team' before their case, if ongoing (more than three months), is routinely transferred to the second tier of intervention, the 'locality team'. The role of the locality team consists of managing longer-term involvement, comprising children in need, child protection and Looked After Children. In order to engage in these various and complex needs the team typically undertakes a detailed assessment of the child and family known as a 'Core Assessment' (see below) which is carried out under the Assessment Framework (National Assembly for Wales 2001a). As I will now discuss, social work practice occurs within a framework, with assessment practices increasingly becoming the focus of regulation and monitoring.

### **Assessment Procedures**

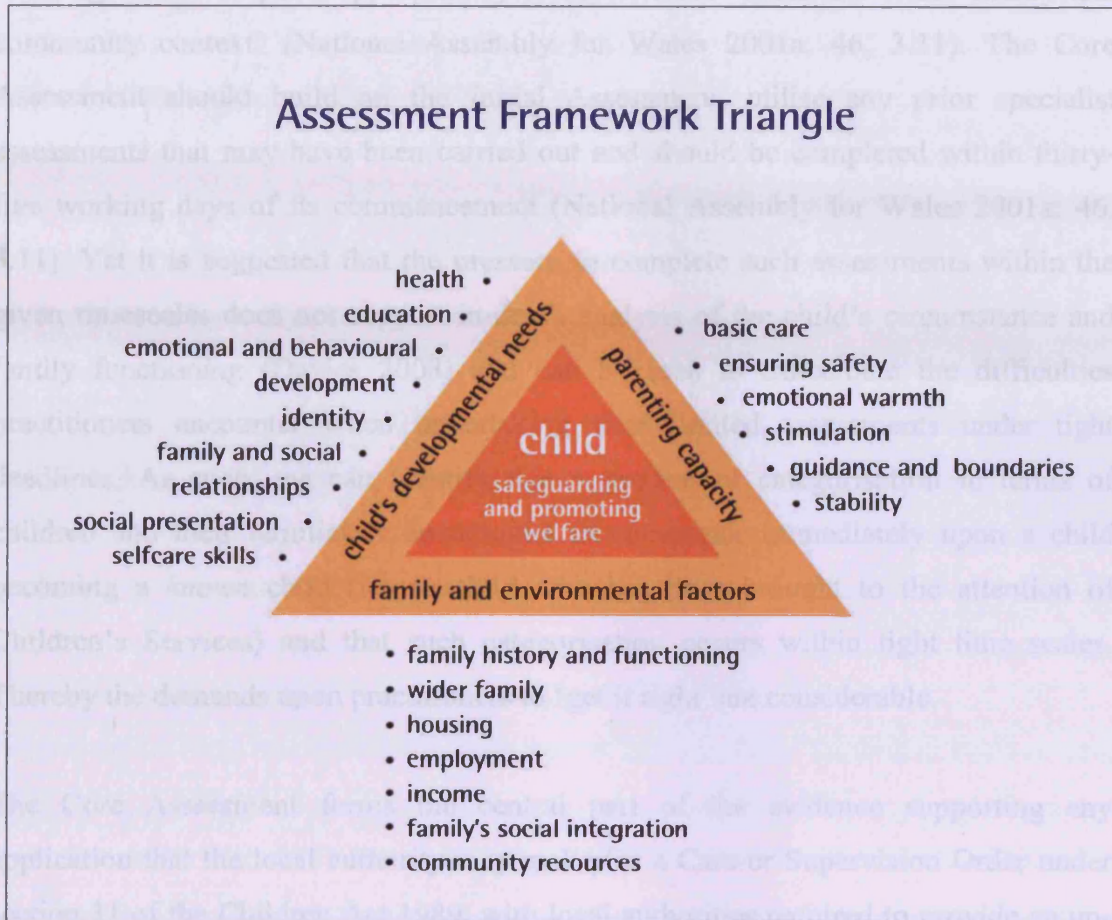
The considerable relevance placed in contemporary social work on assessment is undeniable. Assessment practice as a categorisation method forms a central part of child care social work. As noted by Milner and O'Byrne (2009), assessment enables practitioners to collate evidence 'to find out what is happening to them [children and their families] and how they might best be helped' (preface to the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families*, 2001a: p.xii). Categorisation through the means of assessment is thus a making sense exercise, enabling practitioners to construct a 'case' and account for their continued involvement, or not as the case requires. However as Fraser (1989:153) advises: 'the identities and needs that the social welfare system fashions for its recipients are interpreted identities and needs'. Thereby, as a process of categorisation, assessment work is 'central to

understanding professional action and intervention' (Hall and Slembrouck 2009: 295) and it is through the analysis of assessment practice we can observe how the identities of clients are constructed (for example, as either 'in need' or not) as well as the role, or identities, of the practitioners.

In Wales, where a child is referred to Children's Services as in need of services and/or protection, under the All Wales Child Protection Procedures (2008), the local authority should decide within one working day whether to undertake an Initial Assessment. This decision would normally follow a discussion with the person making the referral and consideration of other information, which the authority may wish to obtain. Any assessment undertaken by Children's Services should be undertaken in accordance with the Assessment Framework (National Assembly for Wales 2001a). The Initial Assessment should be completed within seven working days of the date of the referral, with information gathered and analysed using the dimensions and domains set out in the Assessment Framework, as set out in figure 1 (below).

By undertaking an Initial Assessment, which may be very brief in urgent safeguarding situations, Children's Services may then ascertain whether the child is a 'child in need' (as defined by section 17 of the Children Act 1989) and/or there is reasonable cause to suspect that the child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm (section 47 of the Children Act 1989). However it was not until the implementation of section 53 of the Children's Act 2004, which amended section 17 and 47 of the Children Act 1989, that practitioners were encouraged to ascertain and give due consideration to the wishes and feelings of the child before determining what, if any, services be provided to a child in need or what action to take with respect to a child under section 47. As such, through the process of being brought to the attention of Children's Services children who may be in need or risk come, very rapidly, to be conceptualised as a subset of 'vulnerable children' (Calder 2003: 23) whose voices, until very recently, were unheard. Where a child is considered to be suffering, or at risk of suffering, significant harm and where the child's situation is not considered to

**Figure 1: The Assessment Framework Triangle (National Assembly for Wales 2001a: 17)**



warrant emergency protective measures<sup>4</sup> under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 the local authority has the duty to make enquires to determine whether it should take action to safeguard or promote the welfare of the child (section 47(1)) and what action may be appropriate.

The Core Assessment is the means by which section 47 enquires are carried out<sup>5</sup>. In all cases where an Initial Assessment concludes that there is cause to suspect that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm a Core Assessment should be completed. A Core Assessment is 'an in-depth assessment which addresses the central

<sup>4</sup> Emergency protection may be required to secure the immediate protection of the child. If emergency measures are required the local authority may seek an Emergency Protection Order (section 44 of the Children Act 1989) or the Police may seek a Police Protection Order (section 46 of the Children Act 1989). Where emergency action has been taken section 47 enquires should still be undertaken.

<sup>5</sup> A Core Assessment may also be undertaken in more complex cases where child protection may, or may not, be an issue.



or most important aspects of the needs of a child and the capacity of his or her parents or caregivers to respond appropriately to these needs within the wider family and community context' (National Assembly for Wales 2001a: 46, 3.11). The Core Assessment should build on the Initial Assessment, utilise any prior specialist assessments that may have been carried out and should be completed within thirty-five working days of its commencement (National Assembly for Wales 2001a: 46, 3.11). Yet it is suggested that the pressure to complete such assessments within the given timescales does not support in-depth analysis of the child's circumstance and family functioning (Davies 2008) and can be seen to exacerbate the difficulties practitioners encounter when undertaking time limited assessments under tight deadlines. As such, we can identify that a process of categorisation in terms of children and their families is encouraged to commence immediately upon a child becoming a *known* child (i.e., a child who has been brought to the attention of Children's Services) and that such categorisation occurs within tight time scales. Thereby the demands upon practitioners to 'get it right' are considerable.

The Core Assessment forms the central part of the evidence supporting any application that the local authority may make for a Care or Supervision Order under section 31 of the Children Act 1989, with local authorities required to provide an up-to-date Core Assessment in relation to any child who is the subject of a section 31 application (Ministry of Justice 2008, 2009). The plan for the child should be based on findings from the Initial and Core Assessments, with the aims and outcomes of the plan being set out clearly. The social work assessments that are the topic of this study have all followed the Assessment Framework, which itself is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach to human relationships (1979), and encourages social workers to assess the impact of environmental issues and the capacity of parents to meet the seven dimensions of children's developmental needs<sup>6</sup> (see Ward 2000).

Supplementing the main assessment questions, a range of measurement scales and questionnaires have been produced for use with children and their carers to collect

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<sup>6</sup> The seven dimensions of a child's developmental needs, as defined by Parker *et al* (1991) are: Health, Education, Emotional and Behavioural Development, Identity, Family and Social Relationships, Social Presentation, and Self-care skills, as shown in the Assessment Framework Triangle (Figure 1).



data from different means and to justify the validity of any conclusions reached (Cox and Bentovim 2000). Further, a set of training materials has been provided to back the implementation of the framework (Department of Health 2000; Horwath 2000; National Assembly for Wales 2001b). Assessments under this model are not only aimed at helping practitioners to formulate decision-making and planning for children but, as noted above, now form an intrinsic part of the local authority's evidence in care proceedings (Ministry of Justice 2008, 2009). As such it appears increasingly that assessments, especially those authored for the court arena, are expected to present recommendations that are presented 'not only [as] data but judgments *as if they were certain*' (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000:134, italic original). Thereby, it can be noted that assessment practices operate as part of a bureaucratic process and it is through examining this process, and the skills, knowledges and tools of practitioners, that I wish to uncover how children's identities come to be constructed.

### **Structure of the thesis**

Following on from this introductory chapter, Chapters Two, Three and Four review relevant literature. The literature search undertaken used the bibliographical databases Social Sciences Citation Index and Resource Guide for the Social Sciences as a starting point for the identification of relevant books, journals and published research.

Chapter Two focuses on literature about childhood and explores the discursive influence that adult ideas (and ideals) about childhood have had on how identities in childhood are constructed. How these discursive ideas may shape social work practitioners' assessment of children's identities is also discussed. Chapter Three offers a brief review of the multi-disciplinary theoretical ideas on identity development that practitioners may employ within their understandings of identities. The body of research in this area is vast and therefore within Chapter Three I have attempted to locate the theories of identity development that are most likely to be of relevance to social work practitioners and by extension my enquiries. Finally, Chapter Four locates the research within the field of social work assessment practice. Contemporary trends and ideas about assessment are highlighted in determining the expectations of practitioners when undertaking such work.

Chapter Five outlines the research design and methods that have been used within the study and discusses the theoretical framework, epistemology and multi-method approach that have been deployed. The methods of data collection, sampling, access, ethical issues, the question of researcher identity and the analysis of the data are each described.

Chapter Six introduces the empirical findings and in doing so begins by exploring the practical task of assessing identity. This chapter describes the assessment process and practitioners' interpretive work to indicate how 'identity' in assessment is an artful construction mediated by multiple knowledges, contexts, and opportunities.

Chapter Seven seeks to establish how the Assessment Framework is appraised and utilised by practitioners before turning to critically analyse what appears to constitute identity within social work assessment documents. Thereby unearthing practitioners' use of proxies for identities within their assessment work.

Chapter Eight continues to explore how underlying discursive ideas about children and childhood have acted to shape the ways in which practitioners view and represent children's identities. Differentiation between identities in childhood compared to adult identities are highlighted, suggesting that identities *for* children are constructed as more simplistic and less sophisticated than adult identities and that there exist underlying discursive ideas of childhood such as 'immaturity' and 'naivety' that act to reinforce the role of adults in shaping identities within childhood.

Chapter Nine is the first of two chapters to consider the views of other key stakeholders, namely the parents, carers and the subject children. Chapter Nine reveals that, for parents and carers, emphasis on the specificity and individuality of their child(ren) is what they *expect* to see in assessments that focus upon their child(ren)'s identities. This chapter reveals this and other subtle differences in how parent and carers perceive the identities of the subject children in contrast to the formal constructions of practitioners who operate the Assessment Framework.

Chapter Ten continues this theme of individuality. By inviting children to undertake exercises devised to aid their expression of their identities this chapter demonstrates

how practitioners and children appear to hold discrepant views as to what constitutes a child's identity. As such, this chapter highlights an area of development within social work with children, suggesting that greater inclusion of children within the assessment process may aid practitioners in producing assessments that provide representations of children's identities that are more closely aligned to how the children see themselves, others and ultimately how they make sense of their worlds.

Chapter Eleven considers the implications of the findings for social work services and suggests a model of good practice for the assessment of children's identities. Consideration of the significance and limitations of this research study concludes this chapter and the thesis.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Discursive interpretations on the meaning of children and childhoods**

#### **Introduction**

In the last twenty years there has been a considerable amount of academic discussion as to the late modern conceptualisation of childhood in which the child is ‘conceived of as a person, a status, a course of action, a set of needs, rights or differences – in sum, as a social actor’ (James, Jenks and Prout 1998:207. also see James and Prout 1997; Mills and Mills 2000; Kehily 2004; Corsaro 2005). Yet surprisingly, despite this call to recognise the agency of children, there is little research on how individual children see their overall identities (see for example, James 1993). Assigning an identity to childhood as a social structure, as I shall discuss, tells us little about the identities of individual children. Undeniably, identifying how we view children may form part of how children’s identities are constructed, but caution is necessary: for to truly understand a child’s identities is to understand their individuality.

Every child has a unique set of identities and it can be argued that the standardisation of children as a common group is an oversight that represents the sometimes contested nature of the position of children in society (James 1993). It is my contention that there is a tension between viewing children as a diverse group with individual identities and viewing children as a social group for political and ideological reasons. To understand the conceptual difficulties in defining childhood identities it is necessary to consider the historically and culturally constructed nature of contemporary childhoods. This chapter explores some of the ways we understand childhood as both normatively and scientifically constructed in order to locate patterns of classification, characterisations and explanations of children and their identities (as in Hall *et al.* 2006).

The study may be placed within a social constructionist view of childhood and considers how discourses of childhood are constructed culturally at the macro level of society, and how personal identities are further accomplished via interpersonal interactions between individuals and groups. The definition of discourse that I have employed in this study derives from Mills (2004:15) who advises:

One of the most productive ways of thinking about discourse is not as a group of signs or a stretch of text, but as 'practices that systematically form the objects that of which they speak' (Foucault 1972:49). In this sense, a discourse is something, which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect), rather than something which exists in and of itself and which can be analysed in isolation.

As such, it is through the use of discourses that we come to learn about our worlds, each other and ourselves with such discourses being seen as prevalent yet negotiable (Barrett 1991). Thus, it is necessary to consider the historical and cultural specificity of discourses, in this instance, our constructions of children and childhood.

### **Childhood as a social construction**

The conceptualisation of childhood as a social, cultural and historical construction owes much to the work of the French historian Philippe Aries (1962) and his claims that childhood is a relatively recent social phenomenon. Charting the historical representations of children (mainly through the medium of Art), Aries asserted that in 'medieval society the ideas of childhood did not exist' (1962: 125). In Aries' analysis the concept of childhood as a discrete life stage emerged in Europe between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. Prior to this time once the 'child' moved from the biological dependency of 'infancy' it 'belonged to adult society' (Aries 1962: 2-3). Initially restricted to the domain of upper-class childhood, Aries contends that the competing discourses of childhood sweetness, innocence, and children as 'a source of amusement and relaxation for the adult' (Aries 1962:126) coupled with a moral, Puritan discourse concerned with children's innate 'depravity' gradually became institutionalised into society as a whole. As such the discourse of childhood (as we may recognise it) was 'discovered' (Scarre 1989:7) or 'invented' (Suransky 1982).

Through the passage of time and interaction a discourse has evolved into what we may now recognise as 'modern childhood'. Aries' work had a profound influence on how childhood was conceptualised, particularly his view that childhood was not an essential part of human experience, thereby challenging the populist and intellectual orthodoxy of the time (Goldson 1997). However, there has been much debate as to the

reliability of Aries' methods and resources<sup>7</sup>. As Gittens (2004) notes, Aries' main source of data – the representation of children through Art – is subjective. Such representations of children are representations created by adults. Thereby they offer 'potential insight into what children and childhood mean to adults, what they have meant to them over time, and how (and perhaps why) those meanings have changed and varied' (Gittens 2004: 37). However this gaze is adult created, thus excluding the experiences, thoughts and feelings to the children subject of the adult gaze. That said, Aries undoubtedly brought the nature of childhood into theoretical scrutiny as never before.

It is the premise of this study, like that of Aries', that our understanding of children, childhood and childhood identities is socially constructed; what we understand by these terms is derived from our interaction with each other and society. Widening out from the focused gaze of Aries, the approach of social constructionism is concerned with how our interactions with one another constantly construct our understandings of the world and each other. As such, social constructionism considers how social phenomena are inter-subjectively constructed, such as in the work of Mills (2000) and particularly in Sampson's (2000) analysis of the representation of children in literature and Hanson's (2000) account of the construction of children via the medium of cinematography. At the macro level, social constructionism focuses on the constructive force of temporally and culturally available discourses and their power to shape or restrict identities. At the micro level, this perspective considers the construction and accomplishment of personal identities and meanings derived from everyday interpersonal interactions. This chapter considers the former, i.e., identity derived from the macro level of society; later chapters explore more closely the interpersonal dynamics of the construction of childhood identity from interactions between social work practitioners, the subject child, their parents and carers.

I now turn to highlight some of the discourses available in the social construction of children and childhood and the implications of these discourses for how we may construct identities in and for childhood. Frequently such discourses of childhood are presented in a chronological format (see for example, Steedman 1990; Butler 1996;

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<sup>7</sup> Later historians have critiqued, modified and extended Aries' work, such as Cunningham 1991; Hendrick 1997; Heywood 2001 and Pollock 1983.

Hendrick 1997; Corsaro 2005). However the themes apparent in these contemporary accounts of childhood discourses are all too often adaptations of the stages contained within historical discourses of childhood. Therefore the following section of this chapter attempts a more nuanced exploration of discourses of childhood, as thematically illustrated rather than chronologically driven.

### **The re-telling of old tales: The thematic discourses of childhood**

In evaluating the usefulness of previous work in this area to this study I have attempted to locate those theoretical viewpoints that are most closely aligned to the view of childhood as a socially constructed phenomenon. Within this section of this chapter I have employed the work of Kehily (2004) in determining how we may understand children in modern discourses and the implications for these discourses in how childhood identities may be shaped. Unlike the more established work of James, Jenks and Prout (1998), who present discourses of childhood in terms of: the tribal, socially constructed, socially structural and minority group child, Kehily employs three broader conceptual discourses that underpin contemporary understandings of childhood (the romantic/innocent discourse, the discourse of the Puritan child, and the discourse of *tabula rasa*).

It is necessary however to note that not all theoretical overviews of childhood accept a social constructionist position. For example, James, Jenks and Prout (1998) clearly distinguish the socially constructed child as one specific way of understanding childhood but also consider other ways of how childhood may be constructed. Likewise, James, Jenks and Prout critique a universality of childhood, whereas from a social constructionist viewpoint (as described above), there can be no singular conception of childhood. This study is an examination of how social work knowledge, practice and process are utilised in accomplishing children's identities. As such, it is the social construction of childhood identities within child protection social work, very much a localised context, which is the focus of this study. And, as social work is seen as a socially constructed enterprise (Payne 2005), it is necessary to localise this account further. That said it will become evident that James, Jenks and Prout's discourses of childhood are likely to be in some form identifiable in the understandings of childhood utilised by social work practitioners, and as such attention will be drawn to these areas when they arise.

### **The romantic/innocent child discourse**

*'Curiouser and curiouser!' cried Alice*

(Carroll 1995 [1866]: 15).

Lewis Carroll's telling of Alice's adventures in Wonderland epitomises a child's journey through childhood. The story, commencing with a naïve and unsophisticated Alice, charts how her experiences in Wonderland shape Alice into a shrewd and intelligent young woman: ready for her return to the real world, ready for adulthood. The early Alice is a child created within the romantic/innocent discourse.

The romantic/innocent discourse of childhood constructs the most commonly broadcasted view of children and childhood. As Goldson (1997:1) notes 'the dominant and prevailing western representation of childhood conceptualises an idealised world of innocence and joy: a period of fantastic freedom, imagination and seamless opportunity'. Within this discourse children are seen as loving, playful, joyful and joy-giving individuals, who hold a trusting, believing nature, looking to their superiors (adults) to guide them. However, as Kehily (2004) notes the popularity of this discourse lies in its conception by adults of an adult ideal; this discourse tells us what adults would like children to be, but little of what it means to be a child.

The roots of this discourse are commonly located within the sentiment of Rousseau's account of his relationship with the boy, *Emile* ([1762] 1957) that 'espoused the natural goodness of children' (Hendrick 1997:36). Rousseau emphasised the enduring relationship between children and the natural state of goodness stating:

Nature would have them children before they are men. If we deliberately invert this order we shall produce a forced fruit immature and flavourless, fruit which will be rotten before it is ripe. (Rousseau [1762] 1957: 54).

It is this relationship with natural purity that appears to be a central component to how childhood is constructed within this discourse, providing children with an almost transcendental nature dependent upon, yet corruptible by, contact with adult society. This association of children with purity and a 'natural' state has long endured within adult constructions of childhood (Hockey and James 1993). As Jordanova (in Gittens 2004: 6) observes:



This nature between children, childhood and nature has existed at a number of different levels. It is as complex as our ideas about nature itself; the state of childhood may be seen as pure, innocent, or original in the sense of primary; children may be analogised with animals or plants, thereby indicating that they are natural objects available for scientific and medical investigation; children could be valued as aesthetic objects... but they could equally well be feared for their instinctual, animal-like natures. Two fundamental points...arise out of the association between children and nature: First, the polyvalency of nature led to a variety of concepts of childhood, and second, these diverse meanings of childhood were deeply imbued with moral values.

Jordanova argues that the 'natural' state of children and childhood encourages ideas of children as *pure* and *innocent* on the one hand yet also *instinctual* and *animal-like*<sup>8</sup> thus demonstrating the interpretive effect of discourses on how we come to view each other, society and ourselves. Within this way of understanding children 'childhood is represented as a fact of human life with biology determining children's dependency on adults to provide care' (Goldson 1997:2). Thus biology, as scientific 'fact' within adult knowledge, is employed within this discourse to reinforce childhood immaturity and vulnerability, coupled with emotive adult conceptions of innocence and purity, which construct the child as deeply dependent upon adult society and provides separateness between childhood and adulthood by representing children as what they are not, i.e., adults (Higonnet 1998).

The social construction of children as innocent and vulnerable is perhaps most evident when we consider childhood sexuality and how discourses of childhood sexuality have evolved over time. Sexuality is, of course, socially constructed and what counts as 'sexual' or 'sexy' varies over time and across cultures (Kincaid 1998). For example, in medieval times the Church and common law allowed girls aged 12 and boys aged 14 to marry, assuming that at this age they were sexually mature and able to consummate their marriages (Orme 2001). As such, in medieval times children were seen as sexually mature significantly earlier than in contemporary British society. In fact, the 'age of consent' remained constant in the UK until 1885 (changed to 16 for girls but not boys) when ideas about sexual purity in women and young girls,

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<sup>8</sup> See below how these ways of perceiving children have come to comprise part of the Puritan child discourse.

along with an idealisation of the sexual innocence of girls were socially popular (Kehily and Montgomery 2004). Notions of childhood innocence derived from this period associated sexuality with knowledge, thus aligning the sexually innocent child with a state of ignorance. As Jackson (1982) highlights, this separation of children and sex came into force to create a powerful social taboo, a discourse that asserted that children and sex should be kept apart (also see Walkerdine 1999). As such the social construction of sexuality and childhood means that children are neither inherently sexual nor asexual (Jackson 1982). Considering the controversy that Freud's discussion of childhood sexuality (Freud [1905] 1949) met with (and perhaps has now achieved notoriety for), and his views that rather than children being inherently innocent, children are innately sexual, the power of this discourse becomes evident (Walkerdine 1997). Hence, for Freud there is no *tabula rasa* and no innocent child (Walkerdine 1999). Yet this discourse continues to exist and is evident in contemporary western constructions of childhood sexuality where, if a child is seen as sexually mature, or sexually knowing, this creates adult concern, and frequently generates the need for professional intervention. This can create a role for adults as protectors or 'rescuers' of children.

Contemporary discourses of childhood sexuality appear driven by the subject position of children as innocents. Connecting innocence and sexuality produces asexuality as a defining property of children and childhood that is virtuous, decent and moral (Meyer 2007). However the notion of childhood innocence is a social construction. As Kehily and Montgomery (2004:71) note:

Innocence is not necessarily a given for childhood and cannot be seen as a key feature of children or childhood. ... childhood innocence is an adult ideal, something which adults would like childhood to be.

Thus, this discourse presents us with a 'deficit model' of childhood (Archard 1993; Butler and Williamson 1994a) shaped by adult constructions of childhood. Within this deficit model the child is defined in an oppositional dichotomy to the adult (Taylor 2004; Prout 2005); the child is everything that the adult is not (irrational, dependent, incompetent). By locating these traits as central components of childhood the child is constructed as dependent, requiring adult protection and supervision in order to meet

the needs of adults. Thereby, adults as the definers of children's innocence and vulnerability inevitably become the protectors of children.

Christensen (2000) has argued that vulnerability is a key feature of western conceptions of childhood and, of course, is an important element of the innocent child discourse. This vulnerability is socially constructed as well as biological. However the discourse of innocence is problematic because it conflates innocence and vulnerability and constructs both as innate, essential characteristics (Meyer 2007). As such, the discourse of innocence does not protect children from abuse and indeed may be seen as producing vulnerability rather than protection. Further, by portraying children as entirely virtuous beings, the discourse of innocence predisposes children to become deserving objects of emotional and moral valuation (Zelizer 1985). Children are constructed as deserving, and needful, recipients of adult attention, care, effort and protection. Hence, anyone speaking on behalf of children can represent him or herself as a moral person, as somebody who protects the weak (Meyer 2007). This discourse is perhaps most clearly observed when considering child protection work as 'child rescue'. Holman (1988) explains this in terms of when a child is 'rescued', i.e., permanently removed, from the care of abusive, inadequate and/or morally questionable parents (see also Taylor 2008a). Clearly there remains elements of 'child rescue' within contemporary child care social work, however this must be positioned alongside the legislative doctrine of the Children Act 1989 that the best place for a child to be raised is, whenever possible, within their family.

Thus the romantic/innocent discourse constructs children as an adult ideal: children are constructed as needing adults, thus serving to meet the desires of adults. Within this discourse the subjectivity of the child is recognised only as far as it meets, or challenges, how adults believe children should present. Thereby childhood identities from within this discourse are likely to be adult defined and controlled. Children are seen as vulnerable, naïve, ignorant with these characteristics acting to reinforce a very particular identity for children: as undeveloped, vulnerable and incomplete. This therefore creates a notion of children whose identities are partly defined due to their dependency, by a *need* to be co-identified with adult protectors.

## The discourse of the Puritan child

*...the ugliest weeds of the garden were their children...*

(Hawthorn, 1994 [1850]: 87).

Above I have described the construction of the romantic/innocent child. From that discourse develops the discourse of the Puritan child. Similar to James, Jenks and Prout's (1997) discourse of the 'tribal child' and Jenks' (1995) 'Dionysian' imagery, the discourse of the Puritan child, apparent in the speech of the Puritan Elder in Hawthorn's *The Scarlet Letter*, considers that children are potentially wicked and/or evil, requiring adult supervision to ensure that they remain on the path to goodness.<sup>9</sup> As such, it is the binary opposite of the romantic/innocent discourse, which considers children as innately good. The Puritan child discourse is most evident when children's behaviours and circumstances place them beyond the realm of 'proper' and 'normal' children and childhoods. As such, within this discourse the concept of the demonic, evil child comes into play. Yet it is important to remain mindful that this discourse considers all children to be *potentially* wicked and does not isolate specific types of children as wicked, as evident in some contemporary moral panics about dangerous children and young people (see Walkerdine 1999).

This discourse is most visible when 'unusual' children are discussed, becoming apparent in the viewing of children not only for what they are (children) but also for what they are not ('normal' children). As Cuff (1993) suggests, moral adequacy is often assessed in terms of membership categorisations (such as child, mother) and subcategorises (i.e., an out-of control youth, neglectful mother) and the range of morally sanctioned behaviour associated with them. Take for example the construction of 'street children'. De Moura (2002) offers a powerful picture of young individuals and their street community constructed as aliens to 'normal' mainstream society. Once on the streets, children are considered as part of a different social realm and likely to display personal characteristics which defy the norms and values praised by western societies. These children, positioned outside of mainstream society, are considered regimented by the lifestyles, values and norms of a subculture of their own, the 'street society' (Lusk 1992: 297). As such, their lives are viewed as not

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<sup>9</sup> A later example of this theme can be found in Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954).

being governed by the same laws, which are applied to 'normal', ordinary and law-abiding citizens. This construction of street children as 'fictional characters' (de Moura 2002: 360) excludes them from occupying any legitimate position in mainstream society, thus preventing their reality becoming the shared reality of other children.

Following Lamarckian ideas on genetic inheritance like their offspring, the adults 'responsible' for street children are constructed in a similar manner. Parents are described as having degrading and morally reprehensible characteristics and in the cases where both parents exist (although it is often assumed that they do not<sup>10</sup>) the mothers are cast as highly fertile (Lusk *et al.* 1989) and, as with the fathers, indulge in short-term relationships with several partners (Felsman 1984), abuse alcohol (Connolly 1990; Dallape 1996) and illicit drugs (Dallape 1996), thereby 'confirming' the case that 'unusual' children, such as street children, are spawned by 'unusual' and primarily irresponsible parents (Armstrong 1983). Hall *et al.* (2006) demonstrate how such practices exist within social work, highlighting how professional assessments of the moral character of parents are employed within Child Protection Case Conferences, enabling practitioners to construct the identities of the parent(s) and categorise the case, for example as child protection or family support. Parton *et al.* (1997) similarly note a professional preoccupation with the morality of mothers<sup>11</sup>.

Within the Puritan discourse the construction of 'unusual' children is normally paired with the theme of lost or stolen childhood (Kehily 2004), as within the romantic/innocent discourse childhood is something to be prized, something 'sacred' (Zelizer 1985). However, in the Puritan child discourse how children react to childhood norms particularly children who are not offered the opportunity of a good childhood are the emphasis. One may assume that the Puritan discourse of childhood is more aligned to how children *used* to be viewed rather than how contemporary society views children, yet this discourse saw some popular resurgence in the UK when, in 1993, two-year-old James Bulger was abducted and murdered by two ten-year-old boys, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables. As noted by Davis and Bourhill (1997:45) 'the case and its aftermath was a tragedy of international proportions'.

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<sup>10</sup> See for example, Dallape (1996); Lusk (1992).

<sup>11</sup> Chapter Ten contains a discussion of morality within the assessments in this study's data set.

Tried in front of an adult jury and found guilty of murder<sup>12</sup> Thompson and Venables were sentenced 'for at least 20 years' with Mr. Justice Morland describing the abduction and murder of James Bulger as a cunning and wicked act of 'unparalleled evil and barbarity' (Pilkington 1993). With the judgement in place sections of the media and society felt comfortable to assign Thompson and Venables the identity of demonic non-children (see, for example, Thomas 1993). Sixteen years later, the Edlington case has created similar social and media outrage and response. In April 2009 two young brothers, both of whom were Looked After by Doncaster Children's Services, were charged with the attempted murder of two children. As the media reported at the time of the boys' guilty plea to the lesser charge of grievous bodily harm:

So much about this case was different to the tragic killing of James Bulger in 1993 but it has invited comparisons none the less. Not least in the cruel, almost sadistic nature of the violence, its sexual content and the apparent lack of emotion in the faces of the attackers at the hearing. "The Devil Brothers" one newspaper called them when the events were first reported back in April as if such brutality did not belong to a realm that was human... We know that children can be cruel but we often tend to view it as idle mischief. When it enters the realm of sadism we switch away in horror.  
(Loach 2009: 1-2).

The Bulger and Edlington cases have great significance to how children are constructed within the Puritan child discourse, not only for the gravity of the events themselves, but also in the adult response to the crimes (see James and Jenks 1996). As Monk (2004) notes, the construction of children as 'unusual', 'knowing', morally culpable or at least capable of 'evil' legitimises the demands for justice and adult intervention into their lives. However, as Jenks (1996) observes, constructing children as evil also makes children vulnerable (a notion more aligned to constructions of children as innocent) by encouraging harsh forms of discipline and control. Analogously, in the media reporting of the Bulger case the view that adult society could have prevented the death of James Bulger appears masked by the action of Thompson and Venables. As Davis and Bourhill (1997:46) state:

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<sup>12</sup> It was not until the later Crime and Disorder Act 1998 that the *doli incapax* ('incapable of guilt') presumption of guilt for children between the age of 10 and 14 was abolished.

[The abduction] was witnessed by more than 30 adults who remembered seeing James Bulger being led to his death. Yet the visibility of the crime showed the abductors to be ordinary, indistinguishable from other children....Yet there was an expectation, almost a desire, for those responsible to look different from ordinary or 'normal' boys.

(Daily Express, 25 November 1993 cited in Davis and Bourhill, 1997:46).

In the Edlington case blame was placed on the 'inadequate social workers' that were deemed to have failed to appreciate the true, dangerous potential of the brothers (*The Times*, 4 September 2009). Here lies the crux of the Puritan child discourse; that adults are seen to have control over, and are responsible for, all children with the exception of the uncontrollable, deceitful and wicked children (unless of course these children are visibly, clearly evil). Adults are the moral judges of children and, as in James, Jenks and Prout's 'tribal child'; the Puritan child has self-determinacy, which requires harnessing. The Puritan child discourse clearly assigns children agency, i.e., children choose to be good, naughty, disrespectful, evil. The role of the adult within this discourse is to provide guidance, supervision and punishment when deemed necessary. As such, within this perspective there exists the possibility to view children as having agency whilst perceiving them as vulnerable in that without adult moral guidance children's innate wickedness will prevail (as illustrated in Golding's [1954] *Lord of the Flies*). It is thus the adults who are the judges of the Puritan child, and despite the agency afforded to extreme cases, adults have the ability to shape the identities acquired by children. Thus children, and childhood identities, within this discourse are, again, subject to adult control.

However, different social issues tend to be marked by the predominance of different discourses. For instance, child crime tends to be understood through the romantic/innocent discourse when children are victims (Kitzinger 1997) and through the discourse of the Puritan child when children are perpetrators (Valentine 1996). However some crimes affecting children are considered more severe than others and attract more interest and outrage (such as the abduction and murder of Jamie Bulger), suggesting that the power of moral rhetoric to invoke the 'sacred' status of the child is not independent of social context (Meyer 2007). For example, for some children the 'sacred' status of childhood is simply lost, such as when they become serious criminals (as in Thompson and Venables and the Edlington brothers, above) or when

they become early parents (Chase *et al.* 2009). Further, inherent within the Puritan discourse is the notion of risk. Children are arguably conceptualised as ‘at risk’ from numerous social conditions or phenomena, ranging from video nasties to obesity (Thompson 1998) and recently, the ‘excessive individualism’ of society (Layard and Dunn 2009). Children’s ‘at risk’ status is constant because it is grounded in the nature of the child, its incompetent and vulnerable nature. Being a child becomes synonymous with being at risk, hence risks to children are ever present and thereby constant protection is required (Meyer 2007).

However, increasingly in contemporary society we are witnessing a surge in the notion that children are objects of risk. James and James (2004:167) remind us that ‘the rebelliousness and non-conformity of the young has long been seen as representing a threat to the hegemony of the adult order and values, a threat which requires special measures in order to deal with it’. Yet it remains that to believe that children are ‘capable of violence, of rape, muggings and even murder is an idea that clearly falls outside traditional formulations of childhood’ (James and Jenks 1996: 322). This resistance to acknowledging that children are capable of heinous acts displays opposition to challenges of ideals about childhood, encouraging the construction of young offenders as the ‘other’ (de Beauvoir 1968). Further, those children who fail to conform to the image of ‘the child’ are seen as some of childhood’s failures with their parent(s) seen to have ‘failed’ in their duty as parent(s) (Armstrong 1983). Such children, and parents, invoke fear and public outcry because they bring with them the possibility that we, as adults, no longer *know* what children and childhood are, and are thus no longer able to understand or construct children and their childhoods. As such, it would appear that fear and ignorance act to promote discourses that refuse to acknowledge that children may hold agency, autonomy and agendas.



### **The discourse of *tabula rasa***

*A child's mind is a blank book. During the first years of his life, much will be written on the pages. The quality of that writing will affect his life profoundly.*

(Walt Disney cited in Pinker 2003: 11).

Unlike the previously discussed discourses, the childhood discourse of *tabula rasa* tells us little of the nature of childhood. In fact, within this discourse the child is presented as an empty vessel, as a 'human becoming' rather than a human being or both (Lee 2001; Christensen 2004). Reflective of the deficit model of childhood, this discourse presents an incremental concept of childhood, with childhood seen as an apprenticeship for adulthood (Kehily 2004). Informed by the work of John Locke and his notion that children come into the world as blank slates that could, with education and guidance, develop into rational human beings, this discourse clearly distinguishes children from adults (Hendrick 1997).

As Walkerdine (1984) notes, the emergence of popular and then compulsory schooling (established in Britain around 1880) was central to popularising the idea of childhood as something separate from adulthood (also see Aries 1962). As Näsman (1994) notes schooling is a process in the institutionalisation of childhood and it remains that the school continues as the most common institution for children to date: the school, alongside play areas and leisure facilities have become the special 'islands', or refuges, of contemporary childhoods to and from which children are transported by adults (Zieher 2001). It remains that societal expectation is that every child will experience some form of schooling and usually in the company of many child peers. The development of British state education is well-documented elsewhere (see Sunderson 1995; Cockburn 2000; Jones 2003) and will not be explored here. However, as the most common illustration of the separateness of children from adults in society, the social construction of the schooled child has evident significance for understanding how children are constructed within the discourse of *tabula rasa*.

James, Jenks and Prout (1998) view schooling as a central social enterprise in the situating of the 'social structural' child; education provides the 'social structural' child with a place and purpose in society. Via this situating of the child, they state 'children can claim a strong sense of identity with each other; they are recognisable

internally and can experience the solidarity that derives from a recognition of a shared location in the social structure' (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 209-210). Hendrick (1997:46) too argues this point, stating that the school 'further institutionalised the separation of children from society, confirming upon them a separate identity'. This identity was that of 'pupil', instilled upon children by their compulsory attendance at school and further enforced by societal acceptance, and expectation, that children would fulfil the role of pupil. Yet, as with the romantic/innocent child and the Puritan child, the identity of pupil is primarily an adult constructed identity often imposed upon children by adults.

Undoubtedly peer influences shape how a child identifies his/herself once in schooling (see James 1993; Layard and Dunn 2009), yet the role identification of pupil relates more strongly to a standardised view of children rather than an individualised notion of the child (as evident in James, Jenks and Prout's 'social structural' child). Further, the identity of pupil is not an identity that will be fulfilled in every childhood. Different epochs and cultures place different emphasises upon the value of formal education and as such, the role identity of pupil cannot be assigned universally as an identity for childhood. Thus, within this discourse one childhood identity, that of pupil is suggested, yet this identity is temporal and inclusive. It also reflects a further aspect of this discourse, that childhood is viewed as a stage of development, the successful completion of which leads to the goal of adulthood. As such, it is not what children are that is of interest, rather what they are in the process of becoming (Lee 2001).

Walkerdine (2004:96) recognises this concept within the discipline of developmental psychology stating that in developmental psychology 'the idea of development assumes a rational, civilised adult as its end-point'. Within the discipline of developmental psychology children are generally viewed as 'human becomings' rather than as human beings and as White (1998:268) states 'there is little doubt that developmental psychology has come to dominate professional, and indeed lay, ideas about childhood'. Taylor (2004:226) too notes the extent of this phenomenon in that developmental knowledge of children has 'crossed the boundary between formal expert and informal everyday knowledge to the extent that it has largely become naturalised, taken for granted knowledge'. This notion of 'the developing child'

(Walkerdine 1984) has come to be considered by some as little more than a means of categorising children and regulating childhoods (see, for example Woodhead 1999; Taylor 2004; Burman 2008) and reinforces ideas 'of a normalised sequence of child development' (Walkerdine 1984:155). As such, models of childhood from within developmental theory privilege a particular model of normality, to the extent that it is certain children who are 'othered' (de Beauvoir 1968) and become the object of pathologisation discourses (Walkerdine 1999). For example, normal boys are naughty and playful, not violent; normal girls are well behaved, hard working and asexual (e.g. Walkerdine 1989). Thus providing 'the means for classifying and identifying the abnormal child' (Moss, Dillon and Statham 2000: 240) such as within the Puritan child discourse.

Within the field of social work the principles of developmental psychology, (*viz*, that children are adults in the making), are well established. For example, the key dimensions and domains in the Assessment Framework (National Assembly for Wales 2001a) are predicated on a desire to 'put the child first' (see Parker *et al.* 1991), very much presenting a picture of objectivity, authority and fact concerning children, their needs and what is required to secure their well-being (Garrett 1999, 2002). Yet Knight and Caveney (1998) and Garrett (1999, 2002) provide critiques of these social work models, and highlight the normative assumptions underpinning notions of children and childhood (as well as parenting) contained within these documents. Writing before the Assessment Framework came into effect, Ward (1998) observed that the Looked After Children (LAC) framework in England and Wales and its associated materials (upon which the Assessment Framework is based) represent a particular model of child development that postulates universal developmental stages: thereby alluding to a notion of 'the standardised child' (White 1998: 269). This model also emphasises the desirability, and necessity, of each child's progress along the developmental trajectory 'if they are to achieve satisfactory outcomes, defined as 'long-term well-being in adulthood' (Jackson 1995: 11).

It is not disputed that children change, grow and develop over time or that developmental schemas can enable parents, carers and professionals to identify children who may be in need of services and/or protection. But rather it is my assertion that caution is needed when employing the 'developmental gaze'

(McNaughton 1997) for children, like adults, are individuals who learn, grow and develop at different levels and in different timescales. Further depicting children solely as *en route* to adult maturity can objectify children by focusing upon what they are to become instead of considering the here and now; their lived and experienced childhood (as in Beckett and McKeigue 2009). Thereby, positioning children in a uniform order of 'age', 'stage' and 'development' can act to minimise the subjectivity and individuality of children thus reducing the possibilities of considering childhood identities with depth and scope. The idea that child development is historically and culturally specific (Winter 2006) appears ignored in such conceptions of childhood, thereby reducing childhood identities to an invariant concept, again minimising the subjective nature of childhood. As such, notions of childhood identities, within this discourse would undoubtedly be constructed from a portrayal of children and childhood as universal, constructed from what childhood is not, rather than what it is. Children are thus construed as lacking in 'adult capacities' such as autonomy, rationality and responsibility (Alderson 2000a; Walkerdine 2004) and are assigned identities constructed from adult knowledge from which children are excluded.

From the discussion above it would appear that there exists little discursive acknowledgment of children as social actors, with agency and autonomy. Undoubtedly the Puritan child discourse, for example, affords some children agency however there remains the need for adult regulation of the agency of these children. However this chapter commenced by highlighting the need to acknowledge the integrity and citizenship of children and we now turn the discussion to ways of conceptualising children and childhood that place greater emphasis on children as social agents.

### ***The Children's Rights discourse***

In 1973 Hilary Rodham wrote that the children's rights movement was: 'a slogan in search of a definition' (487) highlighting the intricate and complex nature of the cause. How the children's rights discourse has progressed, or not, in the past few decades suggests that despite the growing recognition of children's citizenship (as discussed in Chapter One) ambiguity still exists as to what the children's rights movement is promoting and what this means for children.

Advocates of the 'children's rights' discourse point out the inherent paternalism that constructing children as needy and vulnerable, as in the discourses discussed above, entails (Woodhead 1997). Within needs-based discourses (such as the romantic/innocent discourse) they contend that concepts like 'children's welfare' and 'the best interests of the child' warrant actions towards children that, in fact, serve adult interests (Lansdown 2001). The child's rights discourse is evident within the recent 'sociology of childhood' movement (Mayall 2002; Prout 2005) which calls for greater autonomy and participation for children in matters pertaining to their welfare and well-being to a far greater extent than is currently afforded children within contemporary childcare legislation, professional practice and societal norms. Within this discourse children are constructed as engaged social actors (James, Jenks and Prout 1998) and emphasis is placed on the active discrimination – 'childism' (Webb, E. 2006) - that children encounter on a daily basis. As such this discourse is critical of the deficit model of childhood and argues that children have learnt to internalise 'childism', taking on societal expectations of passivity and helplessness as their given social roles and identities.

Despite academic and, to a degree, professional acknowledgement of this discourse of childhood, children's rights remain undeveloped. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) can be seen as an attempt to increase children's social participation and agency, whilst promoting their rights to protection and provision. However as Prout (2005:31) notes the UNCRC can be characterised 'as high in rhetoric but low in intensity. In this sense it is a highly suitable instrument through which declarations of lofty principle can be made but about which little needs to be done in practice' (also see Lee 1999, 2001). In July 2007, the United Kingdom's consolidated third and fourth periodic report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child was published, recognising some improvements in children's participation however the concept of children's rights for most children remains a notion rather than a reality (Unicef 2007). Similarly in Wales a survey undertaken in 2007 indicated that 'only 8% of children [living in Wales] know about their rights as defined by the UNCRC' (UK Children's Commissioner Report 2008:6; Funky Dragon 2007). As such, it appears that a children's rights discourse must overcome many obstacles if it is to become internalised within societal views of childhood.

Undoubtedly this discourse presents a notion of childhood that acts to challenge a more needs led and deficit model of childhood. However as Shanahan (2007: 417) observes:

Indeed, although children are afforded basic rights by virtue of their humanity, children's rights legislation has been from the outset geared toward protecting the special status of childhood, a status quite distinct from adulthood. In fact, the very vulnerability (and dependency) of children has and continues to be central to the success of the UNCRC.

Shanahan considers the 'success' of the UNCRC to be located in the almost universal adoption of the principles of the UNCRC, however as has been observed above, the adoption of the principles of the UNCRC has not been fruitful. Rather it is the ambiguities in how we understand childhood that are central to the marginalisation of this discourse. When encountering uncertainty it is human nature to seek reassurance from knowledge that is presented to us as fact or evidence. And the facts that are presented to us in relation to child development and competence are rooted within the deficit model of childhood. Take for example the question of whether children should be involved in decision-making when planning their future. In exploring if this is possible, we may draw on Piaget for assistance. Despite criticism, mainly from a socio-cultural perspective (see Matusov and Hayes 2000), Piaget's (1959) work has been influential in shaping children's and young people's inclusion in decision-making and planning for their lives. Piaget initially believed that children and adults 'thought' differently. In testing, and eventually disproving this hypothesis, Piaget suggested that children's cognitive ability developed in incremental stages; developing chronologically, with an emphasis placed on psychological growth (Smith *et al.* 1998). Piaget stated that between the ages of 11 to 16 years children developed the ability to think subjectively and reflectively, thus being able to ascertain the 'wider picture' in their thoughts (Maier 1969). Flekkoy and Kaufman (1997) also state that from the age of around 12, children develop ability for more abstract thinking and hence more complex decision-making.

Such claims thus provide opportunities to exclude children from decision-making below middle childhood, implying that younger children should be protected from the demands and complexities that active participation involves. Similarly, despite the child/young person's right to participation in planning for their future (as enshrined in

section 22 of the Children Act 1989 and article 12 of the UNCRC 1989), the legal concept of a young person being 'Gillick competent' (1986) denotes that children can make informed decisions on their lives, but only if deemed competent by law. As such the decision to allow children to participate in their care planning, for example, is a decision made by adults (see King and Piper 1995). It is adult knowledge, law and power that make child participation possible. As such, the discourse of children's rights is routinely sabotaged by contemporary acceptance of the deficit model of childhood.

The children's rights discourse, as observed above, is also a discourse that proves divisive in contemporary society. Whilst highly regarded by children's charities, children's commissioners and many academics, many regard this discourse with distrust. For example, the Conservative Party leader David Cameron, in a speech to his Party conference in October 2009 bemoaned: 'we give our children more and more rights, and we trust our teachers less and less. We've got to stop treating children like adults and adults like children' (2009: 2). As such, social acceptance of the notion of children having equal, or even similar, rights to adults appears a step too far for some. In line with this, the child's right to construct his or her own identities is likely to be adult bestowed and controlled.

### **The Quality of Life framework**

'It is not only fine feathers that make fine birds.'  
(Aesop 1994: 29).

We now come to discuss the final concept that may be seen as influential in how we come to understand childhood and children's identities. Quality of life is more a contemporary of policy frameworks, however it is arguably becoming a more prevalent discourse in contemporary social policy and therefore, within this thesis quality of life will interchangeably be referred to as a discourse (as in Stainton Rogers 2004, below) and as a framework. It may be argued by some that quality of life ideas exist at some levels in all the discourses discussed so far, yet it does enjoy clear specificity and is perhaps the ideology most closely aligned to a social constructionist view of childhood. As Stainton Rogers (2004:137) states, 'the 'quality of life' discourse acknowledges, in a way that the other discourses fail to address, that

children's welfare is always contextual'. Developed, in particular, by Casas (2000) the notion of quality of life is useful when considering children's individual identities because it acknowledges that children's satisfaction with their lives and their general state of happiness do not depend exclusively on meeting their developmental needs or fostering their rights. Quality of life is derived from what the child views as important, and therefore quality of life is subjective and owned by the child. As such, this concept focuses on the child's perspective and is strength-led rather than a problem-led view of children and childhood.

Acknowledgment of children's views and their right to have their voices heard is increasingly becoming part of government agendas in the UK. For example, in 2007 the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) was commissioned by the Department of Education and Science to obtain and report the views of children and young people on aspects of the UNCRC in England. It is reported that children saw themselves being privileged in terms of free healthcare, free education, peace and prosperity and that these were the best overall aspects of being a child or young person in England. However, the best aspect for younger respondents (age 11 and under) was friends and family; for 12 to 15 year-olds it was leisure and recreational opportunities; and for 16 and 17 year-olds it was civil and political rights and freedoms. Children noted age restrictions as the most frequent overall worst aspect of being a child or young person in England, followed closely by negative attitudes and lack of respect towards children. For younger children (11 and under), bullying was the worst aspect of life in England; for 12 to 15 year-olds, age restrictions was the worst; and negative attitudes towards the young was the worst for 16 and 17 year-olds, with one in five giving this response (Willow *et al.* 2007). However, how government in England will respond to and utilise this information is unclear and one must question if there is official commitment to recognising and promoting quality of life for all children or if such reports comprise little more than a bureaucratic exercise with limited impact.

The idea of a subjective quality of life calls for children, and their experiences, to be viewed on an individual basis. It is not concerned with treating children all the same, as in the romantic/innocent and *tabula rasa* discourses of childhood, but considers the specificity of children's circumstances. Within this way of thinking, for example, the



construction of street children (discussed earlier) would entail a consideration of the child's adaptation to their circumstances and would consider the happiness and resilience of the child above the child's integration in 'normal' society. Quality of life discourse looks at a child's life experience, circumstances, values and priorities *as a whole*, and recognizes that there can be considerable variation in what matters to a particular child, family, group or community (Stainton Rogers 2004). In many ways this concept holds close the ideas of freedom, childhood joy and creativity that can be located in the romantic/innocent discourse of childhood yet positions these qualities within the child, rather than in adult's impressions of what the child should feel.

Central to understanding how children are constructed within a quality of life framework is the concept of childhood resilience. Childhood resilience is generally defined as successful adaptation in the midst of challenging or threatening circumstances (Howard and Dryden 1999), with it suggested that resilience is an essential human quality, although some individuals hold a greater level of resilience than others (White, M. 2001). Those working with children and young people are well aware that despite the high-risk environments in which some children live they frequently are able to develop into 'successful' young adults. In line with this recognition it began to be argued that most children are competent and confident, and that they can flourish even under adverse circumstances - especially if they have the advantage of caring from adults (see, for example, Fergusson and Lynskey 1996; Daniel and Wassell 2002). For resilient children positive relationships rather than specific 'at risk' or 'in need' factors seemed to have the most important impact (Gilligan 1999a). Thus resilience can be seen as an important component in the assessment of a child's identities from within this framework.

The quality of life framework is comparable to the social constructionist view of children's identities as it views the child as central to identity construction. However, within this model careful attention must be given as to *who* is evaluating the quality of life for the child. Undoubtedly the quality of life framework prescribes that the subject child should be in the position to evaluate their own quality of life but as I have shown within the child's rights discourse, such an undertaking is likely to encounter barriers created by the prevalence of the deficit model of childhood. Nonetheless the quality of life framework holds great potential for assigning children the role of co-

constructor of his/her own identities however it is not evident that society is ready to afford children such agency.

### **Summary**

From the discussion so far it is evident that there exist numerous ways of constructing childhood. This chapter has discussed the constructive force of discourses and ways of conceptualising childhood on how we perceive children's identities at the macro level. However we should remain mindful that the deficit model of childhood appears dominant in the discourses of childhood discussed and although in contemporary social policies we are seeing less of the deficit model of childhood, as exemplified in the quality of life framework/discourse and increased emphasis put on child participation, it shall be seen in the empirical chapters that some of the deficit discourses appear strongly influential in Core Assessments of children. As discussed above, we can observe how notions of childhood naivety, vulnerability and innocence help shape roles for adults as protectors and rescuers of children, whereas ideas of childhood derived from the Puritan child discourse enable adults to enact control and punishment over 'othered' (de Beauvoir 1968) children and their parents. Developmentalist ideas of children as *tabula rasa* further encourage the aforementioned deficit model of childhood with all of these constructions of childhood, as suggested above, identified to varying degrees in contemporary social work child care practices.

Thus it appears that children's individual identities are routinely adult-defined and this, in turn, fuels the ambiguity as to what actually constitutes identity in childhood. In exploring how social work practitioners construct childhood identities it is also necessary to consider their occupational and professional discourses in order to examine fully the possible sources of knowing that are routinely employed by practitioners when considering childhood identities. This chapter has touched briefly upon the influence of developmental psychology within the Looked After Children materials and the Assessment Framework. In the following chapters I consider these points further within the various discursive and practice based sources available to child care social work practitioners.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Theorising identities**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter the discursive ideas that may influence how social work practitioners view children, childhood and thus, childhood identities were examined. In this chapter I seek to deepen the intellectual context for the thesis by examining some of the main psychological and sociological theories about identities, with later chapters analysing how the practitioners' conceptualisations of identities fit with these. In the following chapter the social work assessment process, itself intrinsically linked to social work knowledge, will be considered. However before discussing theories about identities, I will first outline critical aspects of the relationship between theory and practice within contemporary social work that are relevant to this enquiry.

#### **Theory in practice**

The relationship between formal theory and practice in social work is a vexed one.  
(Healy 2005: 93).

The possession of specialist knowledge has typically been cast as an essential attribute of a profession (Millerson 1964; Williams 1993). For social work, the identification of a unique and specialist body of knowledge has been highly problematic, not least because, in contrast to other professions, it has proved difficult to delineate an exclusive disciplinary oeuvre, but also because of the complexities in determining the relationship between theory and practice. Undeniably, theory helps practitioners to 'conceptualise, perform and monitor' their practice (Osmond 2005: 881) yet numerous empirical studies (see for example, Carew 1979; Rosen 1994) have identified that practitioners are often not clear about or able to competently articulate the theoretical basis of their practice.

Research has shown the extent to which practitioners draw on research and theoretical knowledge in practice to be low (Rosen 1994, 2003; Bergmark and Lundstrom 2002) however this does not necessarily imply that practitioners are atheoretical (Fisher 2002; Taylor 2004). In their exploration of newly qualified social workers' perceptions of college training, Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) uncovered that

respondents cited more than eighty different theorists and theoretical approaches as influences upon their practice. A review of contemporary social work literature, likewise, offers numerous suggestions of how the social work practitioner can conceptualise their practice, with Fook and Askeland (1997) observing practitioners' use of theory tends to be confined to use of specific assumptions or concepts (see below). Yet it is often claimed that social work is insufficiently theoretical and that social workers, once their qualification programmes are completed, sidestep theory in favour of common sense and/or practice wisdom (Taylor 2004). This reflects what Eraut (1994) says about professional storage and retrieval of formal knowledge, namely that much of it lies dormant once a programme of education is completed.

However this is not to say that social workers do not hold knowledge grounded in theory but rather the relationship of theory to practice is complex or 'vexed' as Healy (2005) suggests. Practitioners rarely apply formal knowledge to practice in some linear fashion (Reynolds 2000; Nutley *et al.* 2002; Woodcock 2003). This is true of other professionals in the human services and not just a social work phenomenon, but becomes pertinent when we consider the tasks at hand in social work practice. In daily practice social workers deal with the complexities of human life; they listen to, support, and provide advice and assistance to some of the most vulnerable people in society and make decisions and judgements that have profound effects on people's lives. How we come to make these decisions and judgements, it can be argued, lies at the crux of the enduring question '*what do we do when we do social work?*' In Children's Services the making of professional judgments lies at the heart of the application of the Assessment Framework with the assumption that such judgment be grounded in evidence (see National Assembly for Wales 2001a). This represents a significant shift in the relative importance of the use of evidence in the professional task compared with the previous focus placed on procedures (Hollows 2003). Social work practitioners routinely make judgements and put together a case justifying their position and their proposed actions, often mindful that it must prove convincing in court proceedings. These judgements do not rely on formal knowledge alone, but on a range of other rationalities and warrants. Most crucially workers invoke tacit, moral judgments about blameworthiness and creditworthiness, responsibility and irresponsibility (Taylor and White 2001). As Gillies (2005) observes, tacit moral judgements often direct the nature and the type of support that is provided or

promoted by social work practitioners, more so than the practitioner's theoretical beliefs.

Within the social work literature it is suggested that judgement is a compilation of knowledge, skills, values and experience: a mixture of professional authority, including knowledge, experience and expertise; coupled with professional autonomy entailing a capacity for independent thought and action (Youll and Walker 1995). It is argued that the application of pure theory does not reflect the complexities of decision making in contemporary social work. As Taylor and White note 'social work is as much a practical-moral activity as it is a technical-rational one' (2001: 47). To consider the resolution of social work problems as a technical-rational process excludes the human, and emotional, aspect of social work. Admittedly, theoretical perspectives and evidence from research can assist workers in analysing risk and harm but this still leaves the practitioner with the task of deciding which evidence is relevant to the case and then deciding which situations are harmful and risky.

Mindful of the work of Schön (1987, 1991), Parton argues that professional practice has come to be viewed as 'an exercise of technical rationality, that is as an application of research-based knowledge to the solution of problems of instrumental choice' (2000: 453). From this viewpoint knowledge is seen as deriving from scientific, controlled experimentation: 'product knowledge'. Although acknowledging that product knowledge has its place in professional practice (see Sheppard 1995a, 1995b), Schön put forward a move towards a more critical understanding of knowledge. He proposed that rather than applying general principles to individual cases – a characteristic of the positivist methodology of applied, product knowledge – practitioners build knowledge, or themes, from previous experience, through which, in subsequent cases, they may compare new variations: 'process knowledge'.

Whilst the concept of 'process knowledge' and its place within reflective practice appears to be broadly welcomed by social work educators, what constitutes it, how it is realised and what it achieves remains problematic and contentious (Parsloe 2001). A common criticism of reflective practice is its individualistic approach, which makes theoretical transferability and generalisability difficult (Ruch 2002). Moreover, Freire (1994) recognised that learning from experience needs to take place within a context

of good critical thinking skills or critical reflection. However there may be more personal obstacles to reflective learning. As noted by Birch (1998), Brockbank and McGill (1998) and Trotter and Leech (2003) there exists reluctance in social work students and practitioners to acknowledge or value their own knowledge and ideas. As such, issues of ownership and accountability may have some relevance to any resistance to reflective practice and more so than perhaps is recognised by its leading proponents.

It will be revealed in later chapters that practitioners utilise both product and process knowledge in their day-to-day practice. Practitioners, as I will demonstrate, are aware of the difficulties of applying product knowledge indiscriminately but rather than excluding this source of knowledge from their professional repertoire they utilise 'concepts' from product knowledge in their processing of their knowledge of individual cases. This selective use of 'concepts', is described by Taylor and White (2006: 889) who suggest:

Individuals may offer conceptual understandings of something that is not necessarily accompanied by other concepts contained within a theory. For example, a practitioner may cite the concept of 'modelling' but not discuss any other principles contained within social learning theory. They may or may not have a comprehensive understanding of the theory from which the concept is derived.

As such, by drawing on theoretical concepts in making sense of the task at hand, practitioners decompartmentalise the presenting issues, borrowing from different theoretical perspectives to explain aspects of the client's life that are deemed to be problematic. Thereby, a child may be identified as displaying anti-social behaviours at school (social learning theory) that is attributed to the negative impact of parental illicit drug use on parenting (attachment theory) and the poverty, social isolation and disadvantage the family may experience as a cause or consequence (systems theory). By employing knowledge in such a manner the practitioner is thus utilising their experience and process knowledge in shaping the case, whilst adhering to procedural and legal requirements by deploying theoretical, product knowledge to justify their course of action/inaction. Thereby, the practitioner constructs the case (knowledge, action, resolution) via a taken for granted and rarely explicated process of knowledge

selection. In this way, then, practitioners become both the active constructors of their case and their own knowledge base.

### **Social work theory as a social construction**

It is necessary at this point to explore in more depth how theory can come to be considered as socially constructed. As Payne (2005:18) explains:

We create practice theory within social work out of an interaction with social work practice, which in turn interacts with wider social contacts. Three sets of forces construct social work: those that create and control social work as an occupation; those that create people as clients who seek or are sent for social work help; and those which create the social context in which social work is practised.

Thus, social work theory can be considered as constitutive of and constructed by our day-to-day interactions with clients, organisations and the wider social and political environment in which we operate (Rein and White 1981; Osmond 2005). Moreover, theory is seen to be dynamic, culturally and historically specific, and yet predominantly consensual. It is of significance that within this view of theory use and development, the practitioner is seen as '*creating theory in practice*' (Healy 2005: 94. *italics original*). As such, the practice-theory divide, noted above, ceases to be of such significance when the practitioner, as suggested here, is cast as an active agent in the construction of social work knowledge and practice.

Late modernity is multi-faceted, shaped by our differing experiences, multiple authorities and wide-ranging often-inconsistent knowledge. From social constructionist and post-modern perspectives the importance of a much more fluid and artistic form of knowledge is recognised. This may prove productive in rethinking the nature of professional practice, particularly in trying to make explicit the nature of theory *in and for* social work (Parton, 2003 *italics original*). Working with uncertainty and accepting the Socratic notion of *not knowing* are important features of the application of social constructionism to social work (see Parton and O'Bryne 2000)<sup>13</sup>. Yet this position does not imply or encourage disregard for more formalised ways of knowing. In fact, they both appear closely related. As Rodwell (1998) observes, there

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<sup>13</sup> Parton and O'Bryne's (2000) model of *constructive* social work practice, which applies the principles of social constructionism to social work, is discussed in Chapter One.

are a number of areas where social constructionist approaches to both research and practice can be seen to have similarities. Within both applications there is a general recognition of the importance of: the context-bounded nature of reality; the interactive nature of knowing and understanding; the importance of parity and empowerment; the dialogic nature of knowing; the viability and significance of tacit ways of knowing; the contextual nature of functional/pragmatic responses; the multiple perspectives needed for making sense and meaning of and in the world; and the tentative and changing nature of knowledge and goals. As Butt and Parton (2005:795) note, most crucially, both constructionist ‘researchers and practitioners can be seen as being primarily concerned with *enquiry*’ (italics original). Thereby, applying the basic principles of social constructionism to theory and knowledge, practice and research, potentially opens the social work practitioner to many types of knowledge and knowing.

### **Applying identity theory to practice**

As noted above and expressed by Healy (2005:93) ‘social work is a profession based on received ideas, that is, our theories for practice draw substantially on discourse drawn from other disciplines and fields of service activity’. The idea that social work draws from the knowledge of other professionals is not new yet this feature undeniably makes defining social work knowledge problematic. Many of the theories discussed below can be considered as primarily psychological or sociological in nature and not specifically ‘theories of social work’. Yet the concepts contained within these different perspectives can be of use to social work practitioners when considering children’s identities as socially constructed. When selecting theoretical ideas for this exposition I quickly became aware of the array of psychological and sociological conceptualisations on the development of identity. The scope of relevant literature is vast and this discussion is necessarily selective. I have attempted therefore to locate theoretical perspectives in regard to their utility to practitioners when assessing children’s identities. To aid the selection process I first undertook a brief overview of key theories contained within mainstream social work texts (Lishman 1991; Howe 1992a; Healy 2005; Payne 2005) and cross-referenced the theories contained within these with the perspectives most apparent within the Assessment Framework (National Assembly for Wales 2001a) and the accompanying recommended material *The Child’s World* (Horwath [ed] 2000).



From over twenty theories located within these sources, selection was further focused by consideration of their relevance to practice; relevance to purpose; relevance to the formal knowledge base of social work and their value in extending the boundaries of social work's theory base (as in Healy 2005). Through this process I was able to remove popular social work theories that had little application to the assessment of children's identities (such as task-centred practice), and those I deemed less relevant to routine child protection work (such as cognitive-behavioural therapy). However, it remained problematic to cross-reference theories of identity development with much social work theory, and therefore I have arranged together the relevant theories and their inter-connections in broad 'concept' groupings (see below). This, I hope, will aid the reader in recognising the usefulness of identity theory to social work assessment practice. However, before discussing these theories it may be prudent to explain briefly how identity is defined within the Assessment Framework before introducing other theoretical sources about childhood identities.

The Assessment Framework encourages practitioners to break-down the assessment task, and of course the case itself, into manageable sections. The identity section is one of seven dimensions contained within the Children's Developmental Needs domain (above, pg 8). By organising, or framing, the assessment in this manner the Framework also provides readers of assessments with a guide to how to understand the content as well as summarising the purpose of the assessment (as in Woolgar 1980). The guidance on identity accompanying the Assessment Framework advises practitioners thus:

**Identity:** Concerns the child's growing sense of self as a separate and valued person. *Includes* the child's view of self and abilities, self image and self esteem, and having a positive sense of individuality. Race, religion, age, gender, sexuality and disability may all contribute to this. Feelings of belonging and acceptance by family, peer group and wider society, including other cultural groups.  
(National Assembly for Wales 2001b: 19).

Some of the components of identity suggested within the above practice guidance will also appear within the theoretical concepts included in the discussion that now follows. It may assist if I first set out my own epistemological pre-dispositions within this complex field in order to reflect upon possible sources of interest and bias in

selection. As Fook (2001) states, the researcher is the lens through which the world is seen and, as such, reflexivity is an essential skill in acknowledging how one may, albeit unconsciously, place emphasis on aspects that are more closely aligned to one's own ideas than those that are not. In a late modern western pluralist world we hold a number of identities some of these are constructed for us by our parents, friends, employers, etc, (identity theory/ecological approaches) and some we negotiate via the decisions we make in everyday life (social constructionism). All, in my view, are socially constructed and not somehow essential traits of our being; we are not born with predetermined identities but with a culturally and historically given set of relationships that ascribe both who we are and allow space for us to achieve who we become from the experiences and opportunities that we encounter.

### **Multiple Identities? *The concept of a multiplicity of selves***

Within both sociological and psychological literature the possibility that we may hold more than one identity is a prominent feature. Furthermore, there appears to be growing interest in exploring the subjective experience of identity, with the term being used interchangeably with the notion of 'subjectivity'. As Henriques *et al.* (1984:3) explain, 'subjectivity' refers to 'individuality and self-awareness - the condition of being a subject – but understand in this usage that subjects are dynamic and multiple, always positioned in relation to particular discourses and practices and produced by these – the condition of being subject'. Further, as Walkerdine (1999:4) notes, 'the human subject is produced in the discursive practices that make up the social world (as opposed to a pre-given psychological subject who is made social or socialised)'. Unlike symbolic interactionism and Berger and Luckmann's conception of identity, post-structural theorists such as Butler (1990), emphasise how identities are enacted and produced through discourse rather than forming an essential, interior and stable sense of self (Dunn 1998). Some of the most recent theorists of identity acknowledge that the biological and material interact with the cultural in the 'doing' of identity (Butler 1990; Segal 2008). As such, subjectivity, alongside identities, can be conceptualised as the experience of being, shaped by internal and external mechanisms.

Social constructionism recognises that an individual can hold a number of identities or subjectivities. It is concerned with how our interactions with one another constantly construct our understandings of the world and each other. At the macro level of society, social constructionism focuses on the constructive force of culturally available discourses, and the power to shape or restrict identities contained within these discourses. At the micro level, this perspective considers the construction and accomplishment of personal identities and meanings from everyday interpersonal interactions. Within this framework our common-sense understanding of the world, and ourselves becomes the topic of enquiry with our understanding of the world derived from our everyday interactions with one another. Within this perspective we construct our reality inter-subjectively and as no set of social interactions are exactly alike (we present ourselves differently according to the social situation) this opens the possibility for the existence of a number of versions of 'reality' and thereby a number of versions of self. Hence, social constructionists preferably use the term 'identities' to that of the singular 'identity', viewing identities as dynamic and multi-faceted. This reflects the anti-essentialist nature of social constructionism in that there can be no pre-determined nature of reality (or identities) and no fixed, unified self.

Cooley ([1902] in Tice and Wallace 2003) considered how we come to understand how others view us. Cooley (as later with Mead) argues that 'we are in very great part what we think other people think we are' (Pajares and Schunk 2002:10). This allows the possibility for people to have as many distinct selves as there are distinct groups whose opinions matter to them. Cooley suggests that individuals held a 'looking-glass self' through which they became aware of how others saw, and responded to, themselves. In other words, who we think we are is a mirrored reflection of the judgments that others make of us; we are, or become, what others make of us. This idea is highly pertinent for social workers when assessing children's identities, for are we constructing the identities of the child as the child sees itself or as others, or, as we see the child?

Like Cooley, William James ([1890] 1950) considered perceptions of others within his discussion of the self and his ideas on identities continue to be reflected in contemporary thought. James viewed the self as complex and evolving, with identity formation occurring throughout the lifespan. He considered the subject 'I', as the

essential source of personal identity with the object self, the 'me', constituting a 'trisect' empirical self (derived from the material, social and spiritual selves). As Carver (2003) notes, James considered that we each hold within us a multiplicity of selves; our personalities contain a number of selves that we use in our interactions with others. James observed 'man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him' ([1890] 1950: 294), thereby recognising our ability to objectify ourselves, to view ourselves as others view us. In this respect, like Mead and Cooley, James considered that the self was dependent on appraisals received from others. Further, for James our perceived likeness to others was associated with our perceptions of how people viewed our performance and came to form part of his theorisation of self-esteem (as discussed in Chapter Seven).

Reflecting James' notion of a multiplicity of self, Sen (1999) proposed that individuals have multiple identities, with these distinct identities not being reducible to only one idea or notion of a fixed identity. For Sen, we not only have constitutive or 'non-competing' identities (such as being Indian and being an economist) but can also have identities, which are sometimes considered as 'competing' (being an Indian and being a Caribbean). Further, rather than individuals internalising the perceptions of others within their individual understandings of self (as proposed by Cooley and James, above) Sen distinguished other people's perceptions as 'external identity' in contrast to one's own perception as 'internal identity' (Sen 1997: 2-3). Similarly, Hall (1992: 277) recognises this multiplicity of self:

The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about...The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy...[W]e are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily.

Thus whilst some theorists agree on the potential for individuals to hold a multiplicity of self, the differences occur in firstly, how they interpret the appraisals of others within our internal understandings of self and secondly, on an ontological basis – whilst James and Sen's explanations are ahistorical; Hall positions the multiplicity of selves as derived from historical experiences of post-colonialism (Hall 1990, 1992).

To summarise, the notion that we may hold more than one identity arises in both sociological and psychological theories of identity development. As has been noted, the practice guidance for assessing identities highlights a child's 'sense of individuality' alongside a consideration of the 'acceptance of family, peer group and wider society' recognising the external influences that can be seen to shape one's subjectivity. However, the existence of a multiplicity of selves problematises the bureaucratic task of assessing the 'identity' of another and it may be for this reason that the practice assessment guidance does not include the concept of 'multiplicity'. Further, we can see how the practice guidance itself employs the use of concepts in shaping what assessments of children's identities should include. Whilst not seen to actively promote the notion of a multiplicity of selves James' ideas about identity can be associated with the development of our self-esteem, as highlighted in the assessment practice guidance, in that the multiplicity of selves within the individual allows one to respond to successes in some areas of life, and less successful attempts in others (James [1890] 1950). As such, practitioners may be encouraged to assess children in a number of settings, such as home, school, to enable practitioners to develop a better understanding of the identities of the children that they come to assess and to aid an appreciation that children may have many, and not one fixed, coherent identity.

The concept of multiple identities acknowledges the role of socialisation in how we come to develop our sense of 'self', and it is the recognition of the role of socialisation in identity formation that is important to the second concept I wish to discuss, that of incremental identities.

### **Incremental Identities? *The concept of a developing sense of self***

Rather than viewing identities as incremental, essentialist ideas about identity, as alluded to above, perceive the self as a unified and coherent entity, which is linked to a belief in an underlying essential, true self. This suggestion of a fixed, core self implies permanence of a condition, such as sexuality or ethnicity, which is seen to determine the behaviour and thoughts of individuals (Saraga 1998). As Verkuyten (2003: 374) notes, 'essentialism can be examined in terms of category differences that are presented as discrete, necessary, historically stable, and personally unalterable, and that allow many inferences to be made about category members who underneath

would be basically the same'. Thus, as in the ecological fallacy (Robinson 1950), essentialism implies not only permanence of a condition or identity, but also the homogenisation of people defined by this characteristic. As such from an essentialist viewpoint, identities are static and innate. Whilst social constructionism constructs identities as dynamic and fluid it draws from one essential feature of human societies – the ability to use language. However within social constructionism emphasis is placed on the variable meanings that are attached to entities within a specific cultural and temporal sphere and thus rejects the rigidity imposed within essentialist ideas about identity (Burr 2003).

The psychoanalyst Michael White (2001: 9) suggests that the notion of a one true self, in which can be discovered certain essences or elements of human nature, can be unhelpful in postmodern societies, and reminds us of the following:

- a) These essentialist or naturalistic ideas that today shape our taken-for-granted understandings of life and identity came to the centre stage of western culture in relatively recent history.
- b) Human nature has not always been what it is now considered to be, and whatever it is considered to be is always a product of history and culture.
- c) We have not always had identities that are our personal property, nor have we always possessed these essences and elements that are usually referred to as strengths and resources.
- d) In taking the opportunity to deconstruct these naturalistic accounts of identity and life, we don't have to be so tied to the unquestioned reproduction of them in our lives and in our work with others.

By adopting a critical stance towards knowledge and ways of knowing, it can be observed how essentialist ideas about identities are culturally and temporally defined and need to be understood as such. Thus White's ideas problematise the notion of an essential, true self.

Writing about the development of a psychological sense of self, which he believed was constructed as a narrative life story or 'personal myth', McAdams (1993:40) advises:

It is not until age five or six that a human being has a relatively clear sense of what a story is. It is not until late adolescence or young adulthood that a human being typically begins to think of his or her own life in storied, mythic terms. Before adolescence,

we have no life story. We have no identity. But this does not mean that we construct our identity in adolescence from nothing. Instead, we have been “collecting material” for the story from Day One, even though we don’t remember Day One. The years of infancy and childhood provide us with some of the most important raw material for our identities.

Although writing from a social constructionist perspective, McAdams (1993) does make some claims towards essentialism, as in the quote above. This apparent notion of incremental identities appears imbedded in many theories of identity and is itself located within the practice guidance accompanying the Assessment Framework. The guidance starts with the precept that this area ‘concerns the child’s *growing* sense of self...’ (National Assembly for Wales, 2001b: 19. emphasis added) and as such, it would appear that practitioners are likely to view children’s identities as incomplete and developing, with the subject children yet to establish identities of their own. A body of thought associated with, yet distinct from this notion of incremental identities focuses upon identities developing through social interaction, and it is to this idea that the discussion now turns.

### **Identity and social interaction**

From a sociological viewpoint, Mead’s (1934) theorisation of self and society has been influential in understanding identity. Underlying Mead’s ideas is the view that identity (of self and of others) is constructed through our everyday interactions with each other, with identity forming the bridge between the individual and society. Following an idea originally proposed by James ([1890] 1950), Mead saw the self as divided into two halves: the ‘I’ – the inner self, which contains the inner wishes of the individual; and the ‘Me’ – the outer self, which considers the individual’s perception of how others perceive it. For Mead, our internal self-recognition (the Meadian ‘I’) is involved in a constant dialectic with our perceptions of how others perceive us (the Meadian ‘Me’). As such, Mead considered identity to be a product of social interaction, in that people come to know who they are through their interactions with others. As discussed above Mead’s conception of identity development can be seen as an incremental process, in which as the child develops and becomes more socially aware so to does the iteration between the ‘me’ and ‘I’ develop over time.

Thus Mead considered an important element of the self to be the capacity to take on board the attitude of the other – to look at things from the standpoint of the other – an idea not dissimilar to Cooley's 'looking glass self' and one that was taken up by Goffman (1959). Goffman saw the self as a collaborative achievement, accomplished through face-to-face interaction with others. In his later works Goffman expanded his ideas of self (see Smith 2006) to incorporate the notion of 'the countervailing self' (1968). Here the self is personified by societal, or institutional, definitions of appropriateness of role behaviour with 'the countervailing self' resisting these definitions:

Without something to belong to, we have no stable self, and yet total commitment and attachment to any social unit implies a kind of selflessness. Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider societal unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks.  
(Goffman 1968b:320).

Thereby, Goffman proposes that our personal identities evolve through our social interactions. Further, Goffman (1959) also considered the moral character of self-presentations in which by presenting oneself in a certain way a moral right existed to be treated in an appropriate fashion. Thus, for Goffman (1955), morality was not something diffusely located in society, but rather mediated and renewed through everyday social interactions. Following this perspective Berger and Luckmann's (1966) now classic social constructionist perspective, viewed individuals as born into a pre-existing world created by our predecessors but to be acted upon and changed by action and language which constantly creates new meanings within specific cultural and historical milieu. Such a view implies that language is a pre-condition for thought; our ability to make sense of our world derives from our use of language to explain the world (Burr 2003). As such, our ability to define our identities and ourselves is changeable and dependent on the social interactions in which we engage. Thereby, our identity, as constructed through language, is dynamic and multi-faceted and must be considered as incremental, developing alongside our language and comprehension skills.



Leaning more towards the discipline of psychology, Lacan ([1936] in du Gay *et al.* 2000) also considered that identity formation is rooted in the individual's interpretation of social life. For Lacan, individuals first become aware of their developing identity in infancy during the 'mirror stage' of development. In his theory of the 'mirror stage', Lacan argues that the infant, viewing itself in the mirror, 'misrecognises' its true fragmented subjectivity as an apparent whole. Thus the infant's first recognition of a distinction between his or her body and the outside world provides the child with the first glimpse of his/herself as a unified, individual being (Urwin 1984). Lacan believed that to truly become an individual, one must view one's self as separate from others. As such, it is only when the child is able to conceptualise itself as separate from the mother/carer that the child's sense of identity will begin to develop. It is such that in western child rearing practices this separation is not likely to occur until the child begins to develop their independence from their carer, therefore placing the earliest stages of identity development at no younger than one year. This separation is further enforced when the child acquires language. For Lacan it is the structure of language that aids the child's ability to conceptualise themselves as separate from others (Epstein 1991). However, as Flax (1990) argues, Lacan rescues psychoanalysis from a biological essentialism yet tends to subject it to a linguistic essentialism.

Thus it would appear from the above perspectives that support may exist (at least theoretically) for the notion that identity is incremental and/or shaped by our social interactions and our ability to interpret these. Children's development of individual identities is seen dependent upon their developing language skills and ability to respond to others. Such a view appears to be reinforced within the Assessment Framework that reminds practitioners to consider the child's '*growing sense of self*' (National Assembly for Wales 2001b: 19). However if this is the case, how can, and how do, practitioners assess the identities of younger children? With this in mind, I now turn to consider other theories that suggest that identity development is incremental, however emphasis is placed here on the relationality of children's identities to the identities of others.

### **Object relations: *The concept of relationality***

Like Lacan, Winnicott's (1964) theorisation of self encompasses a developmental scheme and an object-relational notion of self. Dews (1987) contrasts Lacan with Winnicott, who 'suggest[s], explicitly against Lacan, that the first mirror is precisely the mother: It is the capacity of the parenting figure to mirror the baby's emotions back to the baby that helps the baby to discover itself' (Dews 1987: 240-1; Winnicott 1971: 111-118). Winnicott (1960: 39) proposed 'the infant and maternal care together form a unit...I once said: 'There is no such thing as an infant', meaning, of course, that whenever one finds an infant one finds maternal care, and without maternal care there would be no infant'. As such for Winnicott, a sense of self and identity is relational.

Developmentally, Winnicott postulates three stages of ego development. *Integration*: the beginning of 'me' from 'not me' separation. At this stage of development the child learns that he/she is separate from the mother/carer (differentiation). During integration, and indeed during all of Winnicott's developmental stages, the experience of continuity and 'going-on-being' is vital to the establishment of a healthy sense of self and is dependent on the child receiving adequate, or 'good enough', maternal care (see Winnicott's ideas on 'primary maternal preoccupation' [1956]). *Personalisation*: the realisation of being one with the body rather than in fantasy. The move from integration to personalisation is a move from 'I' to 'I am', to some sort of affirmation, or preverbal recognition of personal existence. Winnicott's last stage of identity development is *object relating*: separateness is consolidated and ambivalence accepted. The child's experience is now "I am alone" but "there are others I can relate to and make part of me" (as internal objects). Although not specifically noted by Winnicott the object-relating stage of development coincides chronologically with a child's acquisition of language thereby providing opportunity for this stage of development to be compared to Lacan's recognition of the 'Symbolic Order' (1966[2001])

Humans are born into the world in a state of full dependence, with needs that can only be satisfied by others. According to object-relations theories what infants fundamentally seek, therefore, is not so much pleasure as connection with others. The

quality of the relationship between the infant and their primary care giver is seen as central to the child's development of the self; self or identity is thus relational. As noted by Chodorow (1986), the 'relational self' described by object relations theory necessarily moves psychoanalysis away from a monistic, bounded, individualism and towards a more sociological and historical conception of selfhood. That said, this perspective implies an incremental view of child development and its conception of children as needy and dependent upon adults is firmly located within the romantic/innocent child discourse (see Chapter Two).

Whereas the previous theoretical ideas see the development of identities as a linear process, Erikson's theory of identity formation (1963, 1968) allows for regression as well as progression over the life-course. Erikson's theory can be viewed as the one psychological theory routinely taught in social work training that deals explicitly with the concept of identity (see Care Council for Wales 2003). As Westen and Heim (2003:646) note, 'most definitions of identity derive at least in part from Erikson', and Erikson's significance lies primarily in his conceptualisation of a life-span theory of development (Maier 1969) as well as his theoretical closeness to a number of different schools of thought. Erikson (1963) modifies and expands the Freudian stages of psychosexual development, by placing much greater emphasis on the social context of development (Muus 1996). Beginning at birth, Erikson conceptualises an epigenetic developmental scheme in which each stage is folded into the succeeding stage. Thereby the lifelong process of identity formation provides creative opportunities as well as potential for disastrous regression over the life span.

For Erikson, whilst adolescence is the stage for identity formation *par excellence* – a period of detachment from family, of search for idealisable models, or heroes, to serve as raw material in the creation of self through selective identification – the process of identity formation is inherent in every life stage. Erikson's stages are discrete periods of challenge during which the self changes for better (identity opportunities) or for worse (identity crisis) and is thus not dissimilar to the ideas of William James ([1890] 1950). Erikson's central notion is that identity comes from our identification and relationship with others. We become, so to speak, an integrated composite of our relationships with people: parents, siblings, peers, public personages, historical and fictional figures, causes, movements, and ideals. As within social constructionism,

Erikson viewed identity as culturally and historically specific in that we can only become what our cultural and historical context allows.

Undeniably, the assessment of parenting capacity is the assessment of a relationship (Maccoby and Martin 1983). As Reder and Lucey (1995:13) note parenting is not 'a quality that someone does or does not possess, but a relationship that responds to fluctuations in other relationships'. As such, one would expect the assessment of parenting to consider relationality. However the focus of this study is the assessment of children's identities. Commonly, representations of children's identities that are located within the object-relations school of thought reflect the child's identity as seen through their relationship with primary care giver(s). This represents the child's identity primarily in relation to another and implies that the child has yet to develop an identity of his/her own. Undeniably the role identity of 'child' is commonly seen in relation to 'parent', however to view the child in such a narrow perspective does not sit comfortably with child-centred assessment processes (such as promoted within the Assessment Framework). Analogously, to relate a child purely to their relationship with others tends to create children as objects of the assessment rather than subjects (Holland 2001).

Although surprising to those outside of social work practice, it is not uncommon for the 'identity' section on Looked After Children (LAC) documentation and assessments to contain phrases entered by workers such as 'not applicable'. Possible reasons for this may be social, cultural and worker specific. For example, the reference in an assessment by a worker to a child's identities as 'not applicable' can be explained by: the relative lack of significance afforded to identity needs when contrasted with the assessment of risk; a belief that 'identity' is only something that minorities or 'others' (de Beauvoir 1968) have; the increasingly high work load of child care practitioners; insufficient oversight of assessment content and the difficulties that some practitioners encounter when attempting to assess the identities of children (most notably very young children). However it might also be viewed that all these explanations share in a lack of significance assigned to children's identities in a culture that considers these solely as relational to their parents and the adult 'culture' which surrounds them. This concept of relationality, as the reader will note, is a central theme in this thesis.

### ***Identities in Attachment Theory***

The concept of relationality appears to be closely associated with the principles of attachment theory and a discussion of the use of theory in social work would not be complete without reference to attachment. As Taylor (2004:227) states ‘of all theories attachment theory has come to be regarded as having a key place in ‘practice grounded in knowledge’, not simply in therapeutic work but also in relation to assessment and decision-making’. Attachment theory has become a central theoretical concept guiding social work knowledge, practice and policy, with the Assessment Framework (National Assembly for Wales 2001a) making clear the importance of attachment to our understanding of children’s social and emotional competence and self-esteem. As Howe (1987) notes, the ‘special affinity’ between social work and attachment theory is rooted in the usefulness of attachment theory in answering the perennial question ‘what is going on here?’ Yet O’Hagan and Dillenberger (2003) argue that an over-reliance on attachment theory in social work practice is representative of a deep-seated sexism, which continues to position women as the primary service users responsible for children as well as the primary frontline workers in an under-appreciated and under-resourced public service. Further, Woodhead (1999) and Burman (2008) argue that the influence of attachment theory as well as the developmental perspectives of Jean Piaget has resulted in the discursive formation of standardised accounts of children and childhood. Despite this, it appears that an end to the marriage of social work and attachment theory is unlikely.

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) postulates a universal human need to form close, affectionate bonds. At the core of attachment theory is the reciprocity of early relationships, which is seen as a precondition of normal development (Aron 2003). Bowlby observed that the attachment behaviours of the human infant (e.g. proximity seeking, smiling, clinging) are reciprocated by adult attachment behaviours (touching, holding, soothing) and these responses strengthen the attachment behaviour of the infant toward that particular adult. The activation of attachment behaviours depends on the infant’s evaluation of the response, or lack of response, from the caregiver, which results in the child’s subjective experience of security or insecurity. The experience of security is the goal of the attachment system, which is thus first and foremost a regulator of emotional experience (Sroufe 1985). Bowlby (1969) initially defined human attachment more or less in behavioural terms,

in terms of proximity seeking. That is, he saw attachment behaviour as being more or less primarily in the service of physical survival of the individual.

The second great pioneer of attachment theory, Mary Ainsworth (1968, 1982; Ainsworth *et al.* 1978), developed the well-known laboratory-based procedure for observing an infant's internal working models in action. Infants, briefly separated from their caregiver in a situation unfamiliar to them show one of three patterns of behaviour: secure, anxious/avoidant, anxious/resistant. More recently Main and Solomon (1990) identified a fourth attachment style, disorganised/disorientated, which is usually associated with children who have experienced chronic abuse and neglect. The principle of Ainsworth's work argues that children develop an attachment to their parents, even children who are abused. Whilst children of different parenting styles and environments all develop an attachment to their parents, they differ in the security of attachment. Security refers to children's confidence in their caregiver, the belief that the caregiver will be available to safely meet their needs. Security of attachment in childhood is seen as indicative of a stable, social, and successful personality in adulthood (Sedikides and Skowronski 2003). It is likely that this interpretation of attachment theory has become influential as a discourse (through a process not dissimilar from that described by Berger and Luckmann [1966], see below) in contemporary childcare settings. Further, as one will note from Ainsworth *et al.* (1978. above), much investigation into attachment is now undertaken within laboratory conditions, both with children and animals, thereby enabling attachment theory to be seen to produce more scientific formulations and applications (Holmes 1993; Howe 1995; Burman 2008). This feature in the development of attachment theory may influence how practitioners interpret theory as fact, a point discussed in later chapters.

A finding from my own previous research into practitioners' knowledge base about identities, suggested:

Some respondents appear to associate identity with theory, most notably attachment theory, however no respondent referred to identity theory *per se*. This may...represent a gap in training. (Thomas 2005: 73 unpublished).

This has some resonance with the findings from the empirical data from this study, namely that one of the most common theories cited in the identity sections from the sample of Core Assessments is attachment theory. Therefore it would appear that practitioners are interpreting the primary care-giving relationship as being central to identity. Within ‘pure’ attachment theory the emphasis is on how infants regulate their attachment behaviours to optimise the responsiveness of parents or carers (Crittenden 2005). As such the focus rests on how individuals interpret their social interactions and not on social influences, which are commonly amalgamated with attachment theory (as within the Assessment Framework). The use of attachment theory in child care social work has been promoted to such an extent that it has become an integral part of the professional knowledge base. The language of social work is congested with terminology derived from the attachment theory tradition (i.e., bonding, attachment behaviours, ‘good-enough’ parenting) and it is partly the adoption of such terms into the everyday language of social work that (erroneously) creates within practitioners a sense of practice security. However, this adoption over-simplifies formal attachment theory. The way in which theoretical knowledge is derived from ‘pure’ science to application in practice is complex (Taylor 2004). It is rarely a simple matter of replication (Eraut 1994) where raw knowledge gets applied in undiluted form to practice situations, but is a more intricate process of interpretation and diffusion via a range of sources. Practitioners rarely have the time to read original theoretical sources and what does tend to get read and used in practice is not the cutting edge ‘journal science’ which tends to have a more provisional and uncertain feel to it but ‘handbook knowledge’ which has been manipulated into something much more uncomplicated, unequivocal and simplified (Fleck 1979).

### **The social organisation of identities: *The concept of roles***

Above I briefly touched upon the influence of social roles on the construction of identities, namely the role of ‘mother’ and ‘child’. However many theories highlight the importance of social roles on how we come to develop and locate the identities of others and ourselves.

Like symbolic interactionism, Berger and Luckmann’s seminal work *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) consider identities as constructed by social interaction. However, their anti-essentialist views differ from Mead in their interpretation of the

individual/society dualism. Unlike Mead, Berger and Luckmann considered the relationship between the individual and society as reciprocal: reality is constructed from individuals interacting, who in turn respond to the reality that has been constructed. Berger and Luckmann (1966:173) maintain, identities are, at the same time, willed creations and constraining structures: 'Societies have histories in the course of which specific identities emerge; these histories are, however, made by men (sic) with specific identities'. Thus, as with Marx, people make their own identities, but they do not make them just as they please.

For Berger and Luckmann people create their world, or reality, through a process of externalisation, objectification and internalisation. People 'externalise' when they assert a belief or an idea, such as 'children should be seen and not heard', in public. The act of 'externalisation' allows for the belief to enter the social realm, in which it is repeated and retold by others. Through the process of retelling, or sharing, the belief grows and becomes an 'object' of consciousness. Thus as the belief now exists in the social realm it becomes an 'objective' feature of the world. Finally, as individuals are born into the social world constructed by their predecessors, future generations are raised with this belief as a part of their objective reality and 'internalise' it as part of their inter-subjective social world. Thereby through this process it is evident how commonly expressed views, such as those on the nature and identity of children, can become part of shared everyday understandings.

There are also sociological perspectives on the structure and function of people's identities as related to the behavioural roles they play in society and the identities that such roles confer (Hogg *et al.* 1995). The basis of identity theory as role (see McCall and Simmons 1978; Turner 1978; Burke 1980; Stryker 1987) conceives the self not as a distinct psychological entity, but as a relatively static collection of roles through which society is 'complexly differentiated but nevertheless organised' (Stryker and Serpe 1982: 206), thereby providing the constancy of identities that symbolic interactionism rejects. This vision of society forms the basis for the central proposition on which much sociological identity theory is predicated: that as a reflection of society, the self should be regarded as a multi-faceted and organised construct. Stryker and Serpe (1982) proposed that we have distinct components of self for each of the role positions that we occupy (i.e., daughter, worker, parent). The self



is therefore conceived as a collection of identities that reflect the roles that a person occupies in the social structure (Terry *et al.* 1999). A role identity is a set of expectations prescribing behaviour that is appropriate to others (Simon 1992) and it is ultimately through social interaction that identities actually acquire self-meaning. As such, they are reflexive (Burke and Reies 1981). As a person's identity is formed through how others respond to one's role identity, so a child is unable to assume the role identity of 'a child' if surrounding individuals do not respond to the child's role identity (as in Winnicott).

It may also be suggested that children's identities are in some way influenced by the roles, actions and inactions of others. Social learning theory focuses on the learning that occurs within a social context. It argues that people learn from one another via such explanatory concepts as observational learning, imitation, and modelling. Among others, Bandura (see Ormrod 1999) is considered the leading proponent of this theory. Following the general principles of social learning theory individuals learn by observing the behaviour of others (the model) and the outcomes of those behaviours (Ormrod 1999). It is proposed that much behaviour can be learned, at least partly, through modelling, most famously demonstrated within Bandura and Walter's (1959) work on aggression<sup>14</sup>. Likewise, moral thinking and moral behaviour are influenced by observation and modelling. This includes moral judgments regarding right and wrong, which can in part develop through modelling<sup>15</sup>. As such, it may be postulated, under this model, that children learn about, and may adopt, the behaviours and roles of others through the process of 'modelling', and thus come to learn to define and express their own identities from the 'models' in their lives.

The degree of influence that social roles have on shaping our identities is dependent on the specific theoretical perspective that one employs (i.e., Stryker's [1987] identity theory perceives this role as of greater significance than social constructionism). Thus it becomes pertinent for social work practitioners to consider the child's presentation in a number of social settings. Within assessment practice this would require the practitioner to observe and analyse how the child presents at home, school, and other

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<sup>14</sup> Gradually Bandura focused more attention in the role that thinking and cognition plays in the mediation of social learning, refining his theory as 'social cognitive theory' (1986).

<sup>15</sup> Chapter Ten explores how children's accounts of their identities may include reference to how they interpret their own morality.

social activities, with time given to consider how others respond to, and in some cases be seen to shape, this presentation. For example, as discussed in later chapters, in assessments practitioners often comment that a child is not able to develop an appropriate sense of identity in the role of child, perhaps because they are being required to grow up too soon or because parents are not acting in adult ways. As such, to fully understand the child's identities it becomes necessary for the practitioner to consider the 'meaning of the child' (Reder *et al.* 1993) from the perspectives of the significant others within the child's life.

### **Summary**

Within this chapter I have attempted to highlight the main theoretical concepts about identity development that may be of use to practitioners when assessing children's identities. I have discussed how practitioners may draw from concepts from the disciplines of psychology and sociology in their assessments of children's identities and have questioned the current tendency towards attachment theory as a 'blanket' theory on which all areas of assessment can be based. However, what has become apparent from this exploration is that there is no one theoretical perspective that can be viewed as preferable in the assessment of children's identities. As such, I return to a point made earlier, that the utilisation of a combination of theoretical concepts may be best in aiding practitioners in their assessment of the multiple and complex identities of children. These core themes of utilising process and product knowledge in grasping the fluid and relational nature of children's identities lies at the heart of this thesis. It is towards how the assessment process forms not only identities for the child but also for their family, significant others, and the professionals involved that the next chapter now takes us in this case-study exploration of identity and its assessment in Children's Services.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Contemporary themes in assessment practice**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapters have explored key aspects of selective knowledges about childhood and identity that may be influential in how practitioners assess children's identities. However the socially constructed nature of identities means that the process of assessing identities is multi-faceted, with the process forming not only identities for the child but also for their family, significant others, and the professionals involved. Further, the process of assessment is a bureaucratic task, performed in environments and cultures that inevitably shape practitioner performance and production (Rein and White 1981; D'Cruz 1993; Osmond 2005). In this chapter I wish to localise the discussion, and the study itself, with reference to contemporary research and knowledge that illuminates critical features of the assessment process that are relevant to my research questions.

#### **Practitioners' use of the Assessment Framework**

As observed in the introductory chapter to this thesis, the twenty-first century has seen a government-led drive to standardise child care assessments in England and Wales. The Assessment Framework<sup>16</sup> was implemented across local authorities in 2001 and, as discussed below, has come to not only be a pivotal component in how local authorities manage their involvements with children and their families but also how the children and their families come to be understood and conceptualised. The primacy of assessment is claimed in the preface to the Assessment Framework itself as a tool to enable practitioners 'to find out what is happening to them [children and their families] and how they might best be helped' (National Assembly for Wales, 2001a: p.xii). As such, the influence of assessment practice and its explicit process of categorisation are difficult to understate and it is through assessment practice embedded in the Assessment Framework that identities are mediated and constructed within social work.

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<sup>16</sup> Alongside the Assessment Framework a range of measurement scales and questionnaires have been produced for use with children and their carers to justify the validity of any conclusions reached (Caldwell and Bradley 1984; Cox and Bentovim 2000; Bentovim and Bingley Miller 2001).

The Assessment Framework is structured to provide practitioners with a benchmark for their planning and undertaking of assessments, with workers able to employ the Assessment Framework as instructive rather than prescriptive (see Thomas 2005 unpublished). As such, a practitioner's use of creativity when undertaking assessments appears welcomed. For example, in their study of the Assessment Framework Millar and Corby (2006) clearly reveal how some practitioners were able to side-step the perceived constraints imposed by the Assessment Framework to use the assessment process as therapeutic rather than simply an information gathering technique. This indeed reflects the guidance of the Assessment Framework that states:

A practitioner may, during the process of gathering information, be instrumental in bringing about change by the questions asked, by listening to members of the family, by validating the family's difficulties or concerns, and by providing information and advice. The process of assessment should be therapeutic in itself.

(National Assembly for Wales 2001a: 16,1.56)

Walker and Beckett (2003: 4) likewise reiterate the therapeutic role of assessment claiming that assessment is 'more than an administrative task' advising that 'the distinction between assessment and intervention is unhelpful and has always restricted the vision and creativity of social work staff'. Two key implications exist here, which are also present within Parton and O'Bryne (2000). These are (i) assessments should be interactive, co-constructed areas of work, and (ii) a separation between assessment and 'helping' the client is not effective and/or necessary. As such we are drawn to consider assessment as conceptualised within Smale *et al.*'s (1993) exchange model, in which assessment is seen as a two-way process enabling the views of clients and professionals to be accorded equal respect, bringing about change by encouraging clients to externalise, or narrate, their account of what is going on. Thereby assessment work becomes much more than a bureaucratic task.

The model of assessment practice promoted by the Assessment Framework is conceptualised as collaborative, encouraging effective communication between client and practitioner, with effective engagement with service users seen as a basic social work task and skill (Lymbery 2001). Although criticised by some as little more than a performance management tool (Davies 2008) it appears that the Assessment Framework has been fruitful in encouraging better communication between clients

and social workers during the assessment process. For example, Corby *et al.* (2002) sought the views of thirty-four sets of parents being assessed under the Assessment Framework in one local authority area. They found that almost all parents were satisfied or positive in their views about initial assessments, and two-thirds felt similarly about Core Assessments. Focus groups elicited the views of forty practitioners involved in carrying out assessments. They too were positive about initial assessments, though they had more mixed views about Core Assessments, some seeing the Assessment Framework as an impediment to working with families, and others considering that it provided opportunities for more positive intervention. Moreover, the most comprehensive survey of the implementation of the Assessment Framework (Cleaver and Walker 2004, sponsored by the Department of Health) examined work undertaken in twenty-four English councils over a two-year period, which included 866 initial and 68 Core Assessments. A third of the practitioners involved in these assessments felt that the assessment form was too prescriptive and restrictive and had 'hampered the involvement of families' (86). However, three-quarters of the parents reported positive experiences. Cleaver and Walker concluded that in terms of involving children and families, the Assessment Framework had been a success.

Whilst the above studies suggest a positive impact they also highlight differences in how practitioners and service users perceive the assessment process. Further, there remains some concern over the level of involvement of children and families within the assessment process<sup>17</sup>. Jones (2001), although not directly referring to the Assessment Framework, suggested that social work assessment frameworks largely ignore the value of listening and forming supportive relationships between clients and practitioners, diminishing the power of service users to express their concerns effectively. Fergusson (2004) observed that social workers are often at a loss regarding how to communicate the enormity of a child protection investigation to children, with Cleaver and Walker (2004) finding very little evidence of practitioners informing or consulting children and young people during the assessment process. Analogously, Holland (2000), researching prior to the implementation of the Assessment Framework, found that much of the assessment process concentrated on

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<sup>17</sup> The levels of participation of children, parents and carers in the assessments within the data set for this study are discussed in Chapters Nine and Ten.

intensive interviews between practitioners and parents to the exclusion of the subject children and young people (see also, Thomas and O’Kane 1999), with Broadhurst *et al.* (2009) emphasising the difficulties practitioners encounter in firstly, meeting children subject to Initial Assessments within the seven days timescales, and secondly, being able to adequately assess the child’s needs within this timescale. The inclusion of the subject children within assessments becomes especially pertinent when we consider children’s identities and tells us much about how children are constructed in child care work. As Khoo (1999) illustrated, how the voice of the child client is represented, or its absence, are linked not only with the unique interacting in the client-worker encounter, but also to the broader societal role, situation and interpretations of social work and the social position of the child (as discussed in Chapter Two). When child clients are ignored or made secondary in relation to adult clients, both of these acts are ideological stances. However, participation and co-construction are two different sides of the coin and it may be that the issue is more about the extent to which pressured, mainstream practitioners, in complex social work cases, feel confident and competent to effect personal engagements with clients and represent them adequately (Cooper 2001).

The effect on practice of assessment frameworks, which increasingly are e-enabled, has also been subject to scrutiny. Broadhurst *et al.* (2009) expressed concern as to the demands placed on practitioners to complete Initial Assessments within seven working days, identifying ‘short-cuts’ that practitioners employ to ‘get the job done’. This way of completing assessments, they conclude, ‘provide the ‘latent conditions’ for error’ (Broadhurst *et al.* 2009: 14) with time restrictions potentially superseding an assessment of the child’s current circumstances and needs. Further, it is reported that practitioners are often frustrated by electronic information systems that do not work correctly and which require repetitive inputting of data (Wastell *et al.*, forthcoming). Further, in their critique of the Common Assessment Framework (Department of Education and Skills 2007. hereon in referred to as CAF), White *et al.* (2009) identified the ‘descriptive, stylistic and interpretative demands’ (1198) completion of the CAF form requires from practitioners. The three assessment domains of the CAF<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The assessment domains contained within the CAF are: ‘Development of unborn baby, infant, child or young person’, ‘Parents and carers’ and ‘Family and environmental’ (Department for Skills and

are derived from the Assessment Framework and like the Assessment Framework are segregated into discrete dimensions. Thus, according to White *et al.* (2009:1203) 'narratives are designed out', resulting in the potential to 'disrupt the traditionally storied child welfare professional accounts, in which fact and observations/perceptions are assembled in a temporal sequence typical of the narrative format'. Some practitioners within White *et al.*'s (2009) study appeared resistant to these restrictions, continuing to provide narrative accounts of concerns and events rather than employ the 'common language' of needs and strengths as promoted within the CAF. Thus, it can be noted how professional discretion (Evans and Harris 2004) continues to be a critical feature of assessment practices.

As such we can begin to see the complexities involved in undertaking and managing the assessment task. It would seem that practitioners are able to employ creativity and professional discretion in their management of assessments, however the government's attempts to standardise assessments does not appear to have resulted in regulating assessment practice, most notably the inclusion of children and their families as active participants in the assessment process. Thus we begin to develop an idea of what practitioners *do* when they engage in assessment work, however we also require clarity as to *what* practitioners are assessing.

### **The ambiguity of 'assessment'**

The term assessment is an ambiguous one. In one sense all social work activity is based on some form of assessment. Information is sifted and weighed, the views of others are interpreted, and the known past is weighed against future possibilities.  
(Spratt 2001: 943).

The considerable relevance placed in contemporary social work on assessment is undeniable and as Spratt (2001) notes, social work practice can primarily be conceptualised as assessment in practice. We have seen (in Chapter One) the processes that create a need for assessments however the nature and purpose of assessments differ, as do the decisions they inform (Dalglish 2003). For example, the Assessment Framework by definition is an assessment of *need*, however as noted

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Education 2007). The dimensions of the 'development' domain of the CAF are the same as within the 'child's development' domain of the Assessment Framework (see pg 8).

previously, the legal system actively encourages such assessments to consider *risk*. By positioning the Core Assessment as the means to undertake section 47 enquiries practitioners are directed to consider parenting in light of whether it is 'abusive' and thereby to consider if children are 'at risk' (s47 Children Act 1989). Therefore the assessment of parenting capacity has 'a central legal position in child care practice' (Woodcock 2003:88) and enables practitioners to categorise parents (as non-abusive or abusive) and children (as 'at risk', 'in need' or not). However, how do social workers manage assessments of *risk* and *need* when it is evident that no explicit mechanism for assessing risk is contained within the Assessment Framework? (see Cooper 2003)

In Spratt's (2001: 945) examination of assessment practices it appears that practitioners make a conscious priority to identify and manage risks (also see White *et al.* 2009). Social workers acknowledged that both needs and risks were important but, where a choice had to be made, a majority chose to prioritise one (risk) over the other (need). As such, the felt necessity to manage risk seems a pervasive influence not only with families who are the subject of child protection investigations but also with those who receive child welfare interventions. It has been suggested that many social work assessments, especially those concerning child protection, appear 'legally driven so that some assessments ended up as little more than lists of parental errors and omissions' (Farnfield 2008: 1077). Focusing assessments on risk is likely to act to prevent practitioners from appreciating parental strengths and competencies. For example, Iverson *et al.* (2005: 695) describe how assessment practices tend to promote 'an overarching and inherent emphasis on client 'problems', thus prioritising a deficit-based discourse as opposed to a language of 'potentials''. Further, it is suggested that the term 'assessment' in itself encourages a notion of professional expertise and dis-empowers service users (White and Epston 1990; Laird 1995) especially in situations where focus is placed on assessing risk and parental deficits. However despite a practitioner focus on risk, assessments of need are promoted within service provisions and legislation.

The concept of needs-led services has been enshrined in law with section 17(1) of the Children Act 1989 providing local authorities with a duty to identify and assist 'children in need'. The Act defines 'children in need' as those whose health or



development is actually, or likely to become, impaired without remedial intervention (s17 (10)). However the concept of need is subjective and as Bradshaw (1972 in Axford 2008: 2) explains, 'need' can be conceptualised in a number of ways:

Need can be identified by calculating the demand for services (expressed need), or by extrapolating the socio-demographic characteristics of service users for the whole community (comparative need), or by asking individuals what they want (felt need), or by ascertaining levels of expert-defined need (normative need).

Further overlap exists between these different ways of understanding needs (see Axford *et al.* 2004) making the concept of need difficult to conceptualise and as such, it is not always easy to determine a child's primary need (Forrester *et al.* 2007). However as Taylor (2004: 231) reminds us: 'thinking about 'needs' is not inevitable, it is something that we choose to do within a child development framework and it has certain consequences, in particular a tendency to frame issues in terms of the parent-child relationships'. Moreover, as suggested by Preston-Shoot and Wigley (2005) practitioners in assessing needs may be doing so without adequate knowledge and experience. However, the Children Act 1989 (and the Assessment Framework) defines need thus:

For the purposes of this Part a child shall be taken to be in need if—

(a) he is unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision for him of services by a local authority under this Part; (b) his health or development is likely to be significantly impaired, or further impaired, without the provision for him of such services; or (c) he is disabled.

(Children Act 1989, section 17(10))

As such, the concept of *need* implies possible harm or impairment that can be readily associated with existing, or possible future, *risk*. It can be considered therefore that where there is an identified *need*, *risk* coexists too. The notion of *risk* in social work is reported as 'inadequately examined and explicated' (Cooper 2003: 100) and as noted above, the Assessment Framework appears to have evaded providing practitioners with an explicit reference to the management of assessing risks. This may be in

response to the criticism that the Framework's predecessor, the 'Orange Book'<sup>19</sup> (Department of Health 1988) encountered in that it was seen to encourage 'checklist fixation' where practitioners indiscriminate use of, and over-reliance on checklists emanates from a misplaced belief in the efficacy of such tools (Corby 2000; Beckett 2001) and was seen to focus overly on risk, failing to recognise that most parents have strengths as well as weaknesses (Cooper 2003). Further, Budd (2001) found that assessing practitioners often neglected to describe the parent's care-giving qualities and only noted perceived deficits (see also Woodcock 2003).

It has been noted that in most English speaking countries child protection practice has become increasingly forensic and deficit-focused (Connelly 2004). However there is a shift within the discourse of parenting assessment from a focus on deficit-based models, in which attention was paid to identifying parenting problems and risks, to a more strengths-based approach, where a parent's strengths or competencies are acknowledged (National Assembly for Wales 2001a; Jack 2005). For the purposes of assessing parenting capacity, a focus on strengths and competence is clearly vital in helping worker and parents to see that parenting problems do not dominate all understanding and that, however entrenched the 'problem', they as individuals are likely to be much more than their problems (Saleebey 1997). This idea is reinforced by the Assessment Framework's suggestion that 'the process of assessment should be therapeutic in itself' (National Assembly for Wales 2001a: 16, 1.56). Further, one of the core features of enabling practice is working from a strengths-based perspective (Bundy-Fazioli *et al.* 2008) as it is believed that focusing on client strengths and building a collaborative relationship 'equalises power' (Beyer 1997:3) thus promoting the active participation of family members within the assessment process.

At the same time, there have been concerns expressed about the move to strengths-based models, including strong criticism expressed about any dilution of risk awareness within the Assessment Framework (see Calder 2002, 2003). However strengths-based assessment practice is not simply the opposite of deficit models of intervention. Indeed, ignoring deficits in parenting or family functioning, and being

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<sup>19</sup> The 'Orange Book' (Department of Health 1988) offered practitioners a model of risk assessment in terms of specific question sets used to elicit information that would help determine if a child was at risk.

overly optimistic about situations of risk and people's real-life difficulties would be dangerous to children, as well as disrespectful to parents (Hackett 2003). The essence of a strengths-based approach to parenting issues is therefore not to disregard problems, but to conceive of strengths as a key part of resolving difficulties (see Parton and O'Bryne 2000). Despite the myriad of difficulties that may exist, every parent is likely to have some strengths, qualities or resources (Budd and Holdsworth 1996) and to exclude recognition of these strengths can be seen as misrepresenting or poor framing of the actual circumstances. Further, a focus on strengths-based assessments is of particular importance given that most assessments of parenting capacity are borne out of concern.

So far in this chapter I have highlighted key processes that shape how practitioners manage the assessment task and the potential complexities that practitioners encounter when determining how they manage their assessments as assessments of risk and/or need. The Assessment Framework further encourages practitioners to employ the use of evidence within their assessments thus providing practitioners with additional guidance on how they should present their findings and it is to this dimension of assessment work that I now turn.

### **The use of knowledge and evidence in assessments**

The Assessment Framework not only aims to help practitioners to formulate decision-making and planning for children but as noted previously, now forms an intrinsic part of the local authority's evidence in care proceedings (Ministry of Justice 2008, 2009). As such it appears increasingly that assessments, especially those authored for the court arena, are expected to provide recommendations that are presented 'not only [as] data but judgments *as if they were certain*' (Parton and O'Byrne 2000:134. emphasis original). The social work literature on evidence based practice and policy concentrates primarily upon the effectiveness of social work interventions (Alderson *et al.* 1996; Trotter 2004; Barth *et al.* 2005) and the decision-making processes in social work (MacDonald 1998; Shlonsky and Wagner 2005; van de Luitgaarden 2009) both of which provide snapshots of the multi-faceted nature of social work practice. The underpinning principle of evidence-based approaches, that when we intervene in the lives of others we should do so on the basis of the best evidence

available regarding the likely consequence of the intervention, is itself uncontroversial. However, child and family social work routinely deals with uncertain, contingent and complex matters, such as in child protection, and it is commonly perceived that such issues, with their highly specific complexities, will not lend themselves readily to a process of conceptualisation that is promoted within evidence-based approaches (McDonald 1997; Webb 2001; van de Luitgaarden 2009) and will necessarily require a more intuitive decision-making process on behalf of the practitioner (Hammond *et al.* 2007).

Social work has been claimed as a value-based profession (Ronnau 2001) rooted in a core set of values that give purpose, meaning and direction to the work (Hepworth and Larsen 1993). It is argued that each case must be considered as unique in order to ascertain an individualised perspective of the impact of need or abuse to the particular child or their family (Holland 2004). This doctrine is promoted within the auspices of the Children Act 1989, the legislative benchmark upon which all state interventions into family life in England and Wales are constituted and within the value base promoted within the *Code of Practice for Social Care Workers and Employers of Social Care Workers* (see Care Council for Wales 2002) and the *National Occupational Standards for Social Work* (see Care Council for Wales 2003) upon which social work training programmes are devised. However Jones (1996:190-191) encourages caution regarding how social work values are utilised, advising that values should not be perceived as ‘a substitute for knowledge and understanding’ with Taylor and White (2006) drawing attention to the way in which social work’s value base can be used uncritically and/or to justify decisions for unsound reasons.

Throughout the plethora of documentation accompanying the Framework in Wales (National Assembly for Wales 2001a, 2001b) it has been emphasised that the Assessment Framework is ‘grounded in knowledge’ (Rose and Aldgate 2001). Knowledge is defined in the Framework as ‘theory, research findings and practice experience in which confidence can be placed to assist in the gathering of information, its analysis and the choice of intervention in formulating the child’s plan’ (ibid: 1). It is thus implied within the Assessment Framework that knowledge is a multi-faceted source through which ‘evidence’ can be accumulated. This implicit notion is reinforced by the inclusion of Holman, Parker and Utting’s (1999) thoughts

upon the status of social work knowledge contained within the practice guidance accompanying the Assessment Framework (2001b: 54-55):

The body of knowledge available to those who struggle with today's problems of child care is still rudimentary compared with the physical sciences ... indeed, social work today is expected to be 'evidence-based', something that would have been an unrealistic aspiration in, say the 1950's, when there was virtually no evidence upon which to draw.

Davies, Nutley and Smith (1999) similarly position social work (as well as in other public sector services such as education and criminal justice) as historically lacking an agreed notion of what constitutes good evidence. An absence of consensus regarding appropriate research methodology has resulted in little agreement in the field of social care as to how (and which) evidence should be used, in defining 'what works'. As Blum (1978: 156) states 'child abuse research ... has many of the characteristics of a pseudo-science, a land of wish fulfilment, enabling people to discover what they would like to believe'. Dingwall (1989: 49) elaborates this argument more generally by his observations that 'feminists discover that it is all an expression of patriarchy; utopian socialists that it is a perversion of capitalism; conservatives that it is a symptom of moral decay'. Davies *et al.* (1999) describe this phenomenon as arising from deep-rooted ontological and epistemological assumptions in some fields of social work writing that draw upon post-modern perspectives that express much distrust in notions of an objective general form of evidence. This stands in stark contrast to the health care sector where a research culture exists that typically accepts that rigorous, scientific evaluation of evidence is necessary in determining the effectiveness of service provision (Davies and Nutley 2000).

Significantly, the knowledge informing the Assessment Framework is derived from a range of disciplines. For example, the knowledge informing the domain of the 'Child's Developmental Needs' is cited in Rose and Aldgate (2001) as psychological (the work of John Bowlby [1953] on children's attachment behaviours), physiological (Perry's [1993] work on children's sensory development), and cognitive- behavioural (the work of Skinner [1974], Bandura [1976] and Seligman [1975]) to name but a few. However, it is important to note that these are theory based sources rather than evidence based sources. However, this 'multi-faceted approach' to child development

reflects the Assessment Framework's drive to offer the potential for conceptual unity across professions and professionals under the ecological approach to childcare (see Bronfenbrenner 1979; Belsky and Vondra 1989) but also exhorts a commitment to the application of good evidence from a range of disciplines. As such, the emphasis is not only placed upon what we know from social work research but also on what we can learn from the evidence of other disciplines.

The Assessment Framework is an attempt to articulate, and indeed standardise, some of the current themes and issues in social work assessment practice and to learn the lessons from past failures and weaknesses in assessment practice (Calder and Hackett 2003). The emphasis placed within the Assessment Framework on timescales for completing assessments and the use of evidence in decision-making and professional judgments appears to be an area of some controversy in the evidence-based approach utilised within the Framework (see van de Luitgaarden 2009). For example, the timescales laid down by the Assessment Framework are clearly in response to the criticism of the previous guidance for social work assessments (the 'Orange Book' (Department of Health 1988), which it is claimed allowed unacceptable 'drift' in child care planning (Katz 1997). However, the timescales within the Assessment Framework are criticised for being mechanistic, meeting the needs of the agency rather than the clients (Booth *et al.* 2008), and in fact, are not evidence-based as they fail to consider the plethora of evidence concerning matters of client engagement and resistance to the assessment process and minimise the time necessary in devising informed assessments of needs (Calder 2003). With recent research suggesting that up to 60 per cent of social workers time is now spent inputting information onto computer systems (Samuel 2005) it would appear that the systems put in place to improve practice are at risk of displacing analysis and judgement as the basis of decision-making with focus now placed on meeting targets with practitioners protecting themselves by following the book. This reflects the findings of Leigh and Miller (2004), who when exploring service users appraisals of the service they received, suggest that when social workers are under increasing pressure to evidence quality in their work, it appears that the social work relationship could be the sacrificial lamb within the modernisation agenda for childcare.

### **Inter-agency work in assessments**

As noted above the Assessment Framework promotes practitioner use of evidence and knowledge (or at least theory) from a range of disciplines, encouraging information and evidence sharing between the agencies who may be working with children and their families. However inter-agency working is not a simple task. Within the professional sphere practice is shaped by a myriad of influences, such as organisational structures and mandates, access to resources, law, theoretical cultures and professional knowledges. The personal sphere can also shape practice, as personal identities, culture and background play a role in influencing the way we think about what we do (Connolly 2003). All these aspects come into play when practitioners are expected to engage and collaborate with practitioners from other disciplines.

Multidisciplinary contact is a defining feature of the child protection system, the lessons of child protection inquires (Department of Health 1991) having been codified as procedural advice in *Safeguarding Children: Working Together Under the Children Act 2004* (Welsh Assembly Government 2007). Further, following the recommendation of Lord Laming's enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming 2003) the *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills 2004) initiative in England can be seen as reflecting the view that child protection is the joint responsibility of all professionals who work with children and their families<sup>20</sup>. Two key initiatives within *Every Child Matters* are the CAF, 'hailed as a needs-led, evidence based tool which will promote uniformity, ensure appropriate 'early intervention', reduce referral rates to local authority children's services and lead to the evolution of a common language' amongst child welfare professionals' (White *et al.* 2009: 1199) and the recent introduction of ContactPoint (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009) intended to address long-standing concerns about effective inter-agency communication when a child may be in need or at risk (see Garrett 2004, 2005; Dow 2005; Hudson 2005). These schemes are currently being piloted in some areas of England, however their implementation in Wales remains undecided.

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<sup>20</sup> Ambitions similar to those of the *Every Child Matters* initiative can be located within the policies contained in *Children and Young People: Rights to Action* (Welsh Assembly Government 2004).

Inter-organisational partnerships have been traditionally formalised in bureaucratic structures and procedures (Howe 1992b). While 'such contacts may ensure vital information sharing they also provide a common safety net for professionals, who become less individually responsible as a consequence of shared decision-making processes' (Spratt 2001: 941). Further, co-ordinated professional responses in child and family services are reported to be pivotal in providing effective interventions (Bell 1999; McIntosh 2000). Likewise Hallett and Birchall (1992) argue that good inter-agency co-ordination helps to reduce the duplication of services - important in the context of limited resources. As such, inter-agency relationships can be seen as important and valuable but they do not necessarily occur naturally. Inter-agency relationships need to be nurtured in the context of clearly articulated roles and responsibilities (Tomison and Stanley 2001). Each professional will have been socialised into their particular role, and will have a value base and language unique to their particular profession (Calder 2003). For example, Morrison (1998) highlights that for the Police and Probation services the concept of risk is overwhelmingly a negative association, associating risk with danger. This is in stark contrast to debates in child protection where risk of potential danger is weighed against risk of potential benefit (Calder 2003). Stevenson (1989) has reminded us that we should not overlook the effect of role definition upon the attitudes and feelings of the workers involved. Further, roles have emotional as well as intellectual definitions. Professionals working together calls for significant personal investments, introducing a sense of vulnerability, such as exposing practice to peer scrutiny and with it the prospect of being assessed as being less than ~~in~~competent (Calder 2003). Thus the reinforcement of professional identities through inter-agency working necessarily entails the construction of the identities of others.

How social workers present their occupational identity to other professionals is an important element in the construction of identities. As we move closer towards 'multi-agency services'<sup>21</sup> at least in England if not Wales the need to establish plausible identities appears increased. Over twenty years ago Fox and Dingwall (1985) noted that relations between health visiting and social work have been perceived as a serious problem since at least the early 1950s yet the different perceptions, priorities and

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<sup>21</sup> As promoted within the Government's *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2004) initiative.



attitudes of professionals can act to enhance professional identities and service provision for clients. In the case of child mistreatment, Dingwall *et al.* (1983) provided an early argument that the divisions apparent within professional disciplines also function as a safeguard for civil liberties by inhibiting over-zealous accusations and professional intervention in the lives of children and their families. How practitioners manage these divisions is thus central in providing better services for clients. It is thus, that the reinforcement of professional identities necessarily entails the construction of the identities of others. Like Winnicott's (1960) conception that there are no infants without mothers, can we likewise assert that there are no social workers without service users in need and allied professionals.

As noted above, inter-organisational partnerships have been traditionally formalised in bureaucratic structures and procedures (Howe 1992b) and these structures and procedures are subject to change. For example, since Lord Laming's Recommendation 99 (see Laming 2003) the police focus has been diverted to the investigation of crimes, rather than joint investigations of actual or likely significant harm. This has significant implications for how child protection enquires are managed with Davies (2008) noting that strategy meetings are now commonly held without the police in attendance with access to police involvement now being gate-kept by a referral sergeant. As such, if there is no clear immediate evidence of a crime, as is often the case in child protection work, then social workers can find themselves alone in conducting crucial initial investigations. Such changes in inter-agency co-operation can act to muddy already confused ideas as to who is responsible for what and when. These sort of issues have been identified by White *et al.* (2009) and by Cooper (2003) who argues that inter-agency tensions and/or role confusion can lead to assessment paralysis, where the agencies or individuals involved can not agree on the issues to be addressed and how best to intervene. Thus, while effective inter-agency work can promote outcomes for families, the complexities, both personal and organisational, of managing inter-agency co-operation can also be a barrier to efficient service provision.

## Assessment work with (and without) clients

Social work is constructed as social work particularly in *the encounters between clients and social workers*. (Jokinen, Juhila, and Pösö 1999: 8 italics original).

As noted above, assessment is a means for practitioners to make sense of a case and organise their work. However it is also a method in which practitioners come to understand, identify and categorise the foci of the assessment process upon children and their families. Through the process of assessment 'dangerous individuals' (Hearn 1990) can be identified and separated from 'normal people', allowing their 'discipline and punishment' (Foucault 1977). As noted by D'Cruz (2004:73) the identities of 'child' and 'parent', and associated practices judged to be abnormal by the self or professional others, begin the very processes of child protection assessment and intervention.

As a bureaucratic task assessment work creates roles and identities for the stakeholders, which in turn create expectations of how the other will enact his/her role. In terms of the expectations of parents, studies from both the United Kingdom and internationally, have found that practitioners value co-operation and acceptance of concerns by parents when assessing parenting capacity (see, for example, Waterhouse and Carnie 1992; Atkinson and Butler 1996; Fernandez 1996; Holland 2000; Platt 2007). Whereas parents identified practitioners' use of power as influential in shaping their attitudes towards the assessment process (Dumbrill 2006; de Boer and Coady 2007). Dumbrill (2006) found that when service users perceived power as being used *over* them (for example parents' concerns and points of views not being listened to or not being consulted within the planning and decision making in respect of their children) they either explicitly objected proposed interventions or 'played the game' by feigning co-operation as in Reder *et al's* (1993) identification of the phenomenon of concealed non-compliance. However, if practitioner power was seen to be working *with* clients (for example by acting as advocates or organising additional services) clients and workers were able to work together in co-operative relationships. Dumbrill also found that both types of power may be observed at different times during the practitioner/parents relationship thus emphasising the dynamic and fluid relationships that practitioners may have with the families with whom they work. . De Boer and Coady also found that a 'humanistic attitude and

style' from workers was valued by clients. These findings echo those of much research into the social worker-client relationship (see for example, Drake 1994; Howe 1998; Leigh and Miller 2004).

However, recent research has shown that much social work practice, including decision making in assessment work, occurs in the absence of clients. Of course formal meetings tend to include clients in contemporary practice, so this sort of talk happens in informal settings, before and after formal meetings, and in supervision. As Hughes ([1951] 1984: 289) noted, 'no profession can operate without license to talk in shocking terms behind the backs of its clients'. Hence, speech events like 'case meetings' and supervision are especially important in this regard since they are occasions of talking about 'absent clients' (Nikander 2003). There has been important research on 'case talk' and 'case discourse' in recent years, especially in multidisciplinary teams (e.g. Housely 2000; Griffiths 2001; Nikander 2003; Forsberg and Vagli 2006) where hypotheses about a case, and identities of the child and family are constructed and tested within the closed, professional environment. Pithouse (1985, 1998; Pithouse and Atkinson 1988) provides an early example of research focusing on the form and meaning of social workers' oral case presentation with their team leaders. Pithouse made explicit how such case presentations are important devices in demonstrating and assessing professional competencies against the backdrop of the 'invisibility' of social work practices as such:

Talk about clients is work: It is a learned and skilful part of the workers' repertoire of daily practices. Competent practice is "seen" and established when the unobserved client encounter is rendered visible through the workers' accounts of their activities. (Pithouse 1985: 78).

More recently Reimann (2005:417-9) explored this phenomenon within German child care services, noting firstly that case discussions often occur when practitioners are 'among themselves'. This does not mean that it does not matter how the practitioner presents and discusses cases, as by presenting and discussing cases the practitioners display themselves as skilled and expect this recognition from their colleagues. Further, in case discussions the subject is introduced orally and 'off-the-cuff', with their presentation being mostly in the form of a narrative. Through exploring this

phenomenon Reinmann concluded that it is through this process that the collective identity of practitioners' become visible. As such, case meetings are important to practitioners as images, feelings and evaluations about clients are shaped and consolidated in this process. By talking about 'our' clients 'we' conjure up 'our' memories and shared convictions and confirm to each who 'we' are and what makes 'us' special and distinct from social workers in other settings. Further, recent studies into the implementation of the new multi-agency Common Assessment technology (Pithouse *et al.* 2009; White *et al.* 2009) have demonstrated how the electronic focus of an 'e-assessment' necessitates the assessments completion *away* from the clients. As such, we can see how practice, including assessment work, can be conceptualised as negotiated, mediated, and accomplished within a range of social relations and physical and technological contexts (Dingwall 1976, 1983; Rueschmeyer 1983; Davies 1983; Gelles 1987; Scott 1989; Pithouse 1998).

## **Summary**

The considerable relevance placed in contemporary social work on assessment is undeniable. However the task of undertaking assessments, as I have shown, is subject to a myriad of influences that can promote or impinge professional practice. It appears that assessment practices are complex and multifaceted. Since the introduction of the Assessment Framework it would seem that practitioners are afforded some autonomy and are able to employ creativity in their management of assessments. However the government's attempts to standardise assessments do not appear to have resulted in regulating assessment practice, most notably the inclusion of children and their families as active participants in the assessment process. Further legislative demands on practitioners to employ knowledge and evidence within an inter-agency framework can be seen as both promoting outcomes and problematising the assessment process. As such we develop a notion that undertaking assessments is not just a routine social work task but also rather a complex and dynamic process which can be seen to foster a need, and acceptance, for at least some assessment work to be undertaken in the absence of the foci of the assessments, the children and their families.

## **Chapter Five Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Social workers, when making assessments, confront the world rather like qualitative social researchers. They are concerned with issues of description, accuracy, understanding and meaning, and this information is gained largely through interviews, direct observation and documentary evidence.

(Sheppard 1995b: 273)

As an exploration of how social workers learn about and assess children's identities this thesis too is concerned with 'description, accuracy, understanding and meaning'. The processes and methods that I have employed within this study can be viewed as similar to those employed by practitioners in assessment work: both are primarily concerned with making-sense and are discovery orientated. Within this chapter I outline my research design, which is a case study with textual analysis of documents and qualitative interviewing as the core methods of enquiry. The structure of this chapter outlines the progression of my research from gaining access and consent, and identifying sampling techniques, through to the process of examining documents, conducting the interviews and analysing the data. The chapter also includes a consideration of ethical issues in relation to the nature of the research and the research participants, and the challenges posed by my own professional 'closeness' to the research topic and participants.

### **Epistemological position of the enquiry**

Epistemology refers to the principles that inform the generation or development of knowledge and thus the manner in which social reality is viewed as key to determining not only whether knowledge may be regarded as legitimate but also how such knowledge is most appropriately sought (D'Cruz and Jones 2004). Interpretivism, my chosen paradigm, represents an alternative and very different epistemological position to that of positivism. Essentially an interpretivist approach is concerned to explore and understand the meanings that people attach to their actions and experience of the social world (Bryman 2004). Ontological considerations are cited by a number of writers (Silverman 2000; May 2001; Bryman 2004) as a further major component of research design. Ontological questions relate to the extent of

independence or interdependence believed to exist between people and social entities or phenomena. The ontological position of objectivism holds that social phenomena are external to, and thus have an objective reality and identity from, the people engaging with them. Interpretivism however, represents an alternative view, that social phenomena and the meanings attributed to these are socially constructed on a continual and ongoing basis rather than fixed and independent realities.

The theoretical framework of this research is predicated, in ontological terms on social constructionism, which is congruent with the epistemological position of interpretivism. Hence, this research is grounded in an appreciation of the socially constructed nature of identities, in which identity is seen as fluid, multifaceted, contingent and subjective. As such, an individual can be seen to hold many identities, a multiplicity of selves as described by James ([1890] 1950), which can be influenced by various social aspects such as location, response and role. Further, following the social constructionist perspective, research participants are viewed as ‘experts’ by dint of holding unique ideas and viewpoints derived directly from their own experience (Fook 2001). Within this study professional ‘stories’, whether these be accounts from interview or extracts from organisational documents, are examined to see how far they both display and create shared understandings, prescriptions for action and ideas about what constitutes competent social work practice (as in Hall 1997). Alongside these accounts, the views of parents, carers and children have been sought in order to ascertain how their constructions of identities compare with those of the practitioner.

However, it should be made clear from the outset that this research is not an attempt to unearth objective ‘truths’ as to how social work practitioners assess and construct identities for children, for as Atkinson (1992) notes, there is no single social reality and thereby no account of the social world can be somehow ‘complete’. What this study aims to highlight is the various processes and meanings that can be unearthed when contemporary assessment practice is examined and the views of the relevant stakeholders are explored. Key to this exploration is a critical stance towards the notion of knowledge held by stakeholders, which is viewed here as cultural, temporal and socially specific (see Delamont *et al.* 2000; Burr 2003).

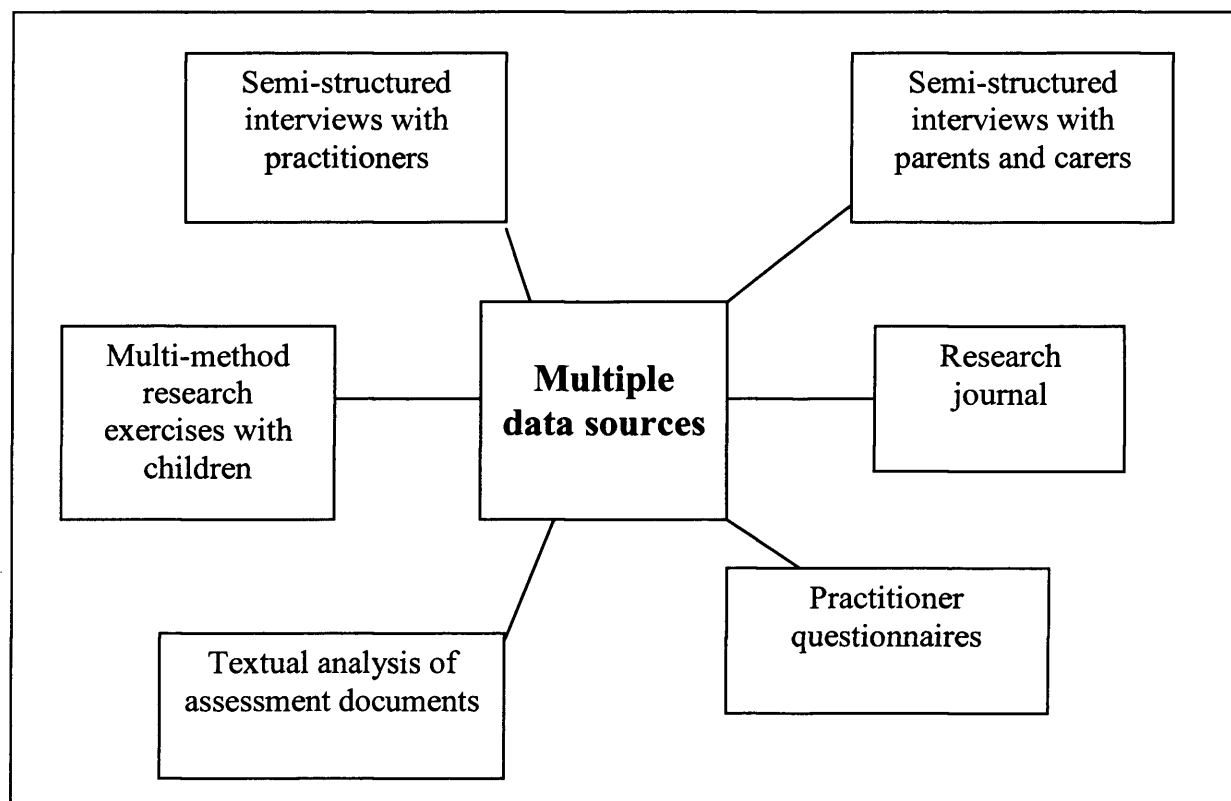
### **Choosing the research method**

This research is a case study of social work assessment practices in one statutory child care organisation, with the data set as a whole constituting a background for understanding the institutional context of the research (Maynard 1989; Baker 2003). Rather than simply representing a method of research, the case study is more generally recognised as a strategic approach to research (Denscombe 2003; Yin 2003; Flyvbjerg 2004). As a major proponent of this research approach, Yin (2003:13) maintains that ‘the case study is not either a data collection tactic or merely a design feature alone but a comprehensive research strategy’. Moreover, the case study approach ‘investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context’ (Yin 2003:13). Few would question the internal validity of the case study approach. As de Vaus (2001:236) observes ‘case study designs are devised to yield a sensible, plausible account of events and in this way achieve internal validity’. Concern as to generalisability and external validity of case study data is frequently expressed, however Yin (2003, see also Mason 2002; Flyvbjerg 2004; Stake 1998) suggests that the basic question asked is: how far is it possible to generalise from the particular to other like phenomena? This issue has been responded to variously. For instance, Bassey (1981:86) advocates the idea of ‘relatability’ rather than generalisability and maintains that if case studies:

...are carried out systematically..... if they are relatable, and if by publication of the findings they extend the boundaries of existing knowledge, then they are valid forms of ... research.

In creating the research design the methods chosen needed to reflect the practice-relevant nature of the study to ensure that the research would be of applied and conceptual value (see Furlong and Oancea 2005). There are, of course, a number of different purposes and uses for social work research including the generation of new knowledge from reflective practice, the enhancement of practice and professionalism, and the evaluation of practice (see Fook 2001). A core objective of this study was to enhance practice by identifying the complex processes that practitioners navigate in their assessments of children’s identities. Edwards and Talbot (1999) note that rich data are essential to effective case study investigations, and in this study I considered a variety of data sources to assist in my exploration, as shown in Figure 2:

**Figure 2: Case study data sources**



The sources of these data are derived from the stakeholders in assessment work: the parents, children, carers and practitioners. In seeking to involve the stakeholders in the research project I was mindful that ‘participation does not simply imply the mechanical application of a ‘technique’ or method, but is instead part of a process of dialogue, action, analysis and change’ (Pretty *et al.* 1995: 54). The successful use of participatory techniques is thus observed in the process rather than simply the techniques used. Thereby, the genuine use of participatory techniques requires a commitment to ongoing processes of information sharing, dialogue, reflection and action (see Theis 1996). As a starting point in designing this research the assessment documents, as organisational artefacts, became the primary source of data that stimulated various other areas of enquiry. Interestingly, while the assessment documents indicated which practitioners, children, family members and carers should be invited to participate in the study, as well as reveal possible topics of enquiry, analysis of the documents did not make self-evident how best to go about collecting further data.



I opted for individual interviews as the core method of data collection for my research as 'interviews yield rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings' (May 2001:120). However, interview methods come in many shapes and guises and I decided to adopt semi-structured interviewing as the standard means of data gathering for all participants. The main features of semi-structured interviews: flexibility, interaction, exploration and the generation of new thoughts and ideas (Legard *et al.* 2003), are principles that I aimed to utilise within my data collection and analysis. In semi-structured interviews, according to Bryman (2001), the emphasis of the process should be upon how the respondent frames, understands and interprets the subject matter and thereby the effective interviewer promotes the agency of the participant. Within semi-structured interviews the interviewer guides the participant through the research topic, via questioning, but ensures that the participant is afforded the opportunity to digress or place emphasis on the issues that they perceive as meaningful. However, the meanings and understandings that individuals attach to their experience are not necessarily pre-formed and readily available for collection, rather the task of making sense of experiences is an intrinsic part of the research process. This is a main tenet of Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) approach to qualitative interviewing, arguing that while the traditional approach to qualitative research viewed interviews as 'a pipeline for transmitting knowledge', the interview is better understood as a site for the production of knowledge. In other words, as Halford *et al.* (1997:60) have written 'in-depth interviews do not allow any privilege or unmediated access to people's thoughts and feelings, but rather produce specific accounts designed to meet the particular situation'. Further, Way (1997), states that this approach to interviewing explicitly acknowledges the interviewer's agenda (e.g., to understand a particular phenomenon or topic from the respondent's perspective) and the participant's agency or power. Hence, this approach would act to facilitate the expression of a participant's individualised experiences and meanings whilst promoting parity for respondents by affording them the scope to highlight areas pertinent to their experience and understandings.

Within this study emphasis is placed on the use of narratives in understanding identities. The narratives considered within this study consist of organisational records - the completed Core Assessments, transcribed accounts of interviews with

practitioners, parents, carers and one of the subject children, and the verbal and written narratives provided by the participant children. Within this study narratives are understood as not somehow transparently reflecting experience; rather they are seen as giving meaning to it (Ferber 2000). Thus, in order to provide the details of life experiences in the form of a story, participants were encouraged in interview to reflect on those experiences, to select the salient aspects, and to order them into a coherent whole. It is this process of reflection and 'making sense' out of experience that makes telling stories in interviews a meaning making activity (Rubin and Rubin 2005).

### **Gaining access and the sampling process**

The choice of the research setting was primarily driven by practical and strategic considerations of access to data sources that would be much less easily available to 'outside' researchers. As a practitioner I had previously worked within the team whose assessments would become a primary topic of my enquiry into children's identities and therefore I had some status as an 'insider'. I had also undertaken research in the agency for my Masters dissertation (Thomas 2005, unpublished). As noted below, the process of gaining access was thereby relatively unproblematic. However my previous knowledge of the agency, the practitioners and the work undertaken, in short my closeness to the research topics and participants, inevitably influenced how I was perceived by respondents and vice versa, as well as impacting upon my analysis of the data, as I discuss later in this chapter.

I sought permission for access and consent at a number of levels and from a number of 'gatekeepers'. Gatekeepers are defined by Hek *et al.* (1996: 73) as 'people who are attempting to safeguard the interests of others'. My first point of call was to seek permission from the local authority's Head of Children's Services. This proved to be relatively straightforward as I knew the person and had previously undertaken research within the local authority. Nonetheless, I requested access in writing and followed this up by providing the gatekeeper with a copy of my research proposal and met to ensure s/he was fully informed of my intentions. Through this process, permission was given for access to the 'frontline' of the organisation, that is, the team undertaking assessments, and to the case histories of the children and families contained in the assessments they produced. I thereafter contacted the relevant team

manager requesting access to the agency's database where I had been advised records of assessments were held.

Given my familiarity with the area of enquiry I had decided not to collect the (then) current Core Assessments for particular reasons. Firstly, I did not want my involvement to be viewed by service users as in some way related to the agency's on-going work with them. Assessments can be stressful and it would be important for ethical and practical reasons to avoid engagement with families at such times. Clearly, considering 'active' cases in this study would have afforded the opportunity to observe practitioners involved in assessment practices, however I felt that the benefits gained from observing practice was greatly outweighed by the need to ensure that my research did not, in any way, affect (or be seen to affect) the process of assessment. Hence I considered those assessments that had been completed and where some time had elapsed which would allow practitioners and family members to reflect on the process with the benefit of hindsight. Secondly I was mindful that I might have knowledge of some children and families due to my previous employment in the agency. Consequently a time period of a year after my employment was chosen and it was agreed that I would in any event not access information about families known to me.

As the team manager and twelve of the participating practitioners knew me, my introduction to the team ran smoothly and a computer and 'hot-desk' were allocated within the team's office area. Permission was given for an administration assistant to provide help if needed. Upon accessing the agency's database it became apparent this did not hold the information I required. The database, in which all assessments are meant to be recorded, indicated that eleven assessments had been completed within the chosen time-period by the 'intake team' whilst no assessments were recorded as being undertaken within the 'locality team'. It soon became apparent that the database was wholly unreliable and that I would have to rely on practitioners to let me know what assessments they had concluded within the research time-period. However I was concerned that practitioners might only advise me of assessments that they considered 'good' and might not be able to recollect all their assessments, particularly so without my having a reliable case list from which to identify families. After several weeks of engaging mainly with the locality team and by searching organisational records I

identified a sample of twenty-six assessments<sup>22</sup> completed by thirteen practitioners during the chosen time period.

The sampling approach was non-probability in the sense that case selection has been deliberately located in one team and time-limited rather than random, and purposive in the sense that the aim of the research has been that of 'gaining insight and understanding by hearing from representatives from a target population' (Gilbert 2008: 512). Denscombe (2003: 15) proposes that any researcher engaged in non-probability and purposive sampling needs to ask: 'Given what I already know about the research topic and about the range of people or events being studied, who or what is likely to provide the best information?' In attempting to address this question the assessments collated for this research covered a specific time-span, rather than say all cases that became subject of a court intervention, to ensure that the intention to consider a range of concerns, families and their circumstances could be achieved.

Following the collation of the assessment documents all were anonymised on the authority's premises. During these early weeks of research fieldwork, practitioners were asking me when they would be interviewed, and what would be the content of the interviews. This suggested to me they were keen to be involved in the research process, which proved to be the case for all thirteen workers. Also during these early weeks I noted that practitioners started asking me what they should 'put' in the identity sections in the assessments they were currently completing. This posed difficulties for me as I did not want to be considered by the practitioners as an 'expert in identities' and I had to have lengthy discussions with some practitioners to clarify and reinforce the nature of my enquiry and my role as researcher. However, having identified the sample and having anonymised copies of the twenty-six assessments I was able to spend less time at the office (with the exception of interviewing workers), thereby becoming less of a complicating presence in the setting and more able to present myself as an occasionally visiting researcher.

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<sup>22</sup> Four of these twenty-six assessments were 'combined' assessments in that they considered the needs of sets of two siblings. Therefore, in total, thirty-two children were subject to twenty-six assessments.

### **Ethical issues and confidentiality**

As Butler advises, 'the ethical foundation for a code of ethics for social work research is to be derived from the ethics of social work itself' (2000: 4). According to Banks (2006) social work values and ethics are based on Kantian philosophy and rooted in 'respect for the person'. Analogously, professional ethics are regulatory codes that guide professional behaviour according to core social work values, emphasising social justice and change (Dominelli 2002, 2004). Both these positions can be seen as reflected in *The Code of Ethics for Social Work and Social Care Research* (Butler 2002) where emphasis is placed on doing good and not doing harm. As such, my ethical position was to ascertain accurate, useful data whilst ensuring that the interests of the participants were protected.

In addition I sought guidance from a range of ethical frameworks for research including *The Code of Ethics for Social Workers* (British Association of Social Workers 2005), the Economic and Social Research Council's *Research Ethics Framework* for the social sciences (ESRC 2005) and Butler (2002). Also, my research plan was subject to scrutiny from the University's School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, which raised the matter as to whether I (and therefore the University), could hold data in person identifiable form (i.e., the assessment documents) without consent of the subject individuals being obtained. It is of note that Munro, Holmes and Ward (2005:1029) cite that 'until recently, research teams have been granted access to case file data on, for instance, looked after children, for specific research projects without local authorities being required to seek permission directly from the service users for whom they held parental responsibility'. As noted above, the Head of Services and not the individuals to whom the assessments referred gave me access to the assessment documents, which were the property of the local authority. However I shared this matter with the Head of Services who, given his prior knowledge of me as a practitioner, continued to give the agency's consent and did not think it necessary for me to seek the consent of the subject children and families. This information was fed back to the Ethics Committee who gave their approval.

A further issue was raised as to the matter of confidentiality in respect of the assessment documents themselves. Some of the data in this study are assessments

prepared for court and are confidential. It has been necessary to include this information in the study because of the importance of court to these cases and the need for constant comparison between the sources of data (Glaser and Strauss 1999). However, reports prepared for the court are protected documents and so all assessment documents, were fully anonymised by systematically changing names, locations and any other obvious identifiers. However due to the unique personal detail contained within assessments I was not confident that if the documents fell into the hands of others that the identities of children and families would remain unknowable. Therefore I took the decision to only print off and remove from the agency's offices the 'identity' section of the assessments, keeping electronic copies of the full assessments on the local authority's computer system for future access. Furthermore, all anonymised assessment materials that were removed were stored in a secure and locked cabinet. This reduced the potential risk of exposure of personal detail and responded to the principles of data storage, retrieval and access under the 1998 Data Protection Act regarding disclosure of individual identities.

Ethical dilemmas regarding confidentiality led Dominelli (2005) to argue that in social work research 'contingent confidentiality', rather than absolute confidentiality, should be discussed by researchers and participants prior to obtaining informed consent (such as I explained in my initial letters to research participants). In obtaining informed consent I drew upon Humphries and Martin (2000:78-83) who state that ethical research demands that participants are not deceived and must give informed consent, that their privacy is protected and they have the right to withdraw their consent and participation at any time. Thus, following my first contact letter to the participants, which explained in detail matters of anonymity and confidentiality, I wrote again to each individual explaining the nature, purpose and anticipated readership of the research. These principles and related information were repeated and reaffirmed when arranging the interview and seeking consent (see Appendix 2). No participant refused to sign the consent agreement.

### **Sample characteristics: The Assessment Documents**

As stated above, sampling in this research was non-probability and purposive, with the data set comprising all Core Assessments undertaken by the locality team during the six-month period of January to June 2006 (twenty-six assessments). Initial

analysis indicated that the assessments fell into distinct types of assessment, which I categorised as: 'freestyle', 'comprehensive' and 'agency's own template'. Most assessments (eleven assessments, 42.3%) were freestyle, which I specify here briefly as narrative assessments containing a brief synopsis of the reason for assessment, chronology of significant events, a genogram of the family structure followed by commentary in relation to the three domains within the Assessment Framework. A further eight assessments (30.8%) were categorised as 'comprehensive assessments' (a term used by workers in describing these particular assessments). These assessments had all been prepared as part of the local authority's evidence for care proceedings and were much more extensive and detailed than the other two categories. The eight 'comprehensive' assessments followed a similar format to the freestyle assessments but were more 'clinical' insofar as they included the use of an interview schedule and generated a detailed forensic history of family functioning. This form of assessment tended to be lengthier than the other types of assessment presentation. Four of these 'comprehensive' assessments considered sets of siblings, and therefore might be expected to be more detailed however the two assessments that were the most extensive considered one child each. The seven assessments (26.9%) prepared under the 'agency's own template' followed a similar structure to the freestyle assessments, although not all of the assessment dimensions were included<sup>23</sup>. Overall, the length of assessments ranged from seven to eighty-six typed pages, averaging at twenty-eight pages in length, with a mode of seventeen pages (Appendix 3 contains a table showing the time taken to complete assessments for the thirty-two children who were the subject of the assessments).

### **Sample Characteristics: The Practitioners**

At the time the research was undertaken the locality team comprised a team manager, an assistant team manager, a senior social work practitioner, eight social workers, two social care officers (one of whom became a student social worker during the six month data collection period), two student social workers and one administration assistant. With the exception of the team manager, a social care officer and the

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<sup>23</sup> The 'agency's own template' omitted the 'self care skills' dimension of the child's developmental needs domain, the 'emotional warmth' dimension of the parenting capacity domain and the 'community resources' dimension of the family and environmental factors dimensions. Following these omissions being highlighted by the researcher the local authority revised their assessment template to include these 'lost' dimensions.

administration assistant, all team members had completed a Core Assessment within the relevant timescale and participated in the study. The details of the practitioners are shown below:

**Table 1: Details of the practitioners**

Name	Gender	Role	No. of yrs qualified	No. of assessments in data set
Alison	Female	Social work student	Second Year Student	3
Benita	Female	Social work student	First Year Student	2
Chantelle	Female	Social worker	1	2
Christian	Male	Senior social work practitioner	4	1
Frances	Female	Social worker	5	1
Gemma	Female	Social worker student	Second Year Student	1
Gethin	Male	Social worker	5	2
Lola	Female	Social worker	3	3
Olivia	Female	Social worker	3	4 (inc. 1 combined)
Rebecca	Female	Social work	2	4 (inc. 1 combined)
Rose	Female	Social worker	1	4 (inc. 2 combined)
Sioned	Female	Assistant team manager	7	4
Valerie	Female	Social worker	4	2

As is usual within the public care sector, the majority of workers were female with the range of experience encompassing a first year social work student to seven years post-qualifying experience. There appears little differentiation in how many assessments practitioners completed suggesting that assessment work is a routine social work task, undertaken by all and not just those practitioners deemed the more ‘experienced’.

### **Sample Characteristics: The Subject Children**

A total of thirty-two children were considered in the twenty-six assessments, with four of the ‘comprehensive’ assessments considering sets of two siblings. A total of eighteen boys and fourteen girls were subject to assessment. The ages of the children were fairly evenly spread across the younger age ranges and with fewer children of fifteen years or older. This suggests, as in Cleaver and Walker (2004: 225), that younger children were more likely to be the subject of assessment (see Table 2).



**Table 2: Age of subject children at time of assessment**

Age of child	0-2	3-4	5-9	10-14	15+
Number of Assessments	8	9	7	6	2

**Sample Characteristics: Parents and Carers**

Twenty-nine parents of the thirty-two children were asked to participate in the research. Each parent was sent a letter with details about myself and the research project, along with a proforma for him or her to indicate if they wished to participate or opt out, and an envelope was provided for them to return their comments. Parents were given a contact address and telephone number for my research supervisors and myself. Initially two parents accepted by telephone, two declined by telephone, one parent accepted by post and five opted out by post. This left nineteen parents unaccounted for. The telephone details of five parents were accessed from case files and after contact four parents agreed to participate (although only two of these interviews came to fruition). Further letters were sent to the fourteen parents for whom no telephone number could be located offering them an appointment date with a further option of opt out. From these fourteen letters I was able to secure interviews with four parents.

Making contact with the parents provided access to a further source of respondents - resident grandparents. By the end of this process I was able to secure interviews with thirteen parents and carers (see Table 3) of fifteen children (including four sets of siblings) comprising almost half of the children identified across the twenty-eight assessments.

**Table 3: Parent/carers interview composition**

Parent/carers type	No of participants
Resident mother	2
Non-resident mother	4
Non-resident father	3
Resident grandmother	2
Resident grandfather	2

### **Gaining access to children and gaining children's continued consent**

When deciding to seek the views of subject children within this study I had intended, perhaps naively, for the children to be active participants in the research, with their engagement and involvement driven by themselves and not their parent/carers (as in Thomas and O'Kane 1998). However in gaining access to the children there were a number of stakeholders that needed to be involved: the children, parents, carers, social workers and managers (see Hood *et al.* 1996; Heptinstall 2000) and it soon became apparent to me that the children's participation was often subject to the permission of others. Authorisation to access the children from the agency was unproblematic with the agency delegating this responsibility to the parents. As such the decision to partake in the research was primarily the decision of the parent(s) and not that of the children. This greatly reduced the option for some children to participate in the research, and inevitably some children were denied the opportunity to decide for themselves if they wished to know about, and be involved in the study (see Thomas and O'Kane 1998).

Further, the decision about who could consent to a child participating in the research was not as simple as first assumed. Two non-resident fathers gave their permission for me to contact their children. However the children did not live with their fathers and consent of the resident mothers was required. In both these instances I was not successful in gaining access to the children. Further, two non-resident parents gave their permission for me to contact their Looked-After child. This I did, with the child stating an interest in participating in a 'photo diary' research method (see below). However the disposable camera I gave to the child was confiscated at school, which resulted in his foster carer withdrawing him (without the agreement of the child or his parents) from the study. It became evident that gaining the consent of someone holding parental responsibility for a child did not automatically ensure that access to a child could be secured. It is also of note that none of the children who I approached directly to participate in the research refused their consent. As such, I cannot help but question if the process I undertook afforded the children the greatest opportunities to be involved in the research.

In total ten children (including the two children who undertook the piloting exercises) participated in this study, with a relatively even-spread across the age ranges:

**Table 4: Ages of child research participants**

Age of child	0-2	3-4	5-9	10-14	15+
Number of participants	0	3	1	4	2

A key aim of my study was to ensure parity of opportunity to engage in the research for participants. I was keen therefore to ensure that the children, like the practitioners, parents and carers, were treated as social actors and not simply as objects of the research. As such, the children were asked to provide their consent to be part of the research and sign a consent agreement. The seven children aged nine and over in the study were given the choice of signing a consent agreement or providing a verbal agreement; none chose to sign the agreement but gave verbal consent. Younger children, due to issues of literacy and comprehension, were asked to give only their verbal consent. At the beginning and end of each of our meetings the children were asked to confirm their continued consent, with all the children providing this. This approach was informed by Hull (2000:181-2) who conceptualises children's consent as a continuing process not a one-off occurrence, identifying risk, vulnerability and potential harm as cumulative and better tackled by frequent consent seeking. Further, this research orientation allowed the children themselves to act as gatekeepers of the research (Alderson 2000b; Danby and Farrell 2005), deciding if and when they wished to partake in the research.

### **Research and analysis methods**

In this study I employed a range of research methods in order to engage with the challenges of validity. As with Shaw and Norton (2008) I strove to deploy a dialectical relationship between methods, in order to recognise and respect diversity in ways of knowing. Similarly, a dialectical relationship between data collection and analysis has been promoted, with analysis not perceived as a discrete phase of the research. Thus reflecting the view:

The process of analysis should not be seen as a distinct stage of research; rather, it is a reflexive activity that should inform data collection, writing, further data collection, and so forth....The

research process, of which analysis is one aspect, is a cyclical one. (Coffey and Atkinson 1996:6)

As with the methods of data collection, analysis within this study is perceived as artful and creative (Guba and Lincoln 1981; Goetz and LeCompte 1984). The aim being to acknowledge the many different ways of knowing and understanding identities and also in acknowledgement of our diverse ways of expressing ourselves and learning about one another. Thus the more we learn about others from a variety of techniques and the more we examine our data from different viewpoints, the more we may reveal, construct and appreciate complexity (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

Triangulation as a means to promote validity has proven to be particularly useful in this study. Delamont (2002: 181) suggests that there are three main types of triangulation: 'between methods, between investigators and within the method'. This study sought triangulation between methods by collecting and comparing data from a variety of sources, and comparing data sourced by a single method. I now turn to discuss these techniques of analysis in more depth.

### **Textual Analysis of the documents**

All texts are written from *somewhere*, and that point of origin, which continues the writer's ideology, if you will, necessarily plays a part in producing meaning.  
(Parini 1995:52. emphasis original)

Smith (1982, 1984, in Watson 1997) advocates that documents considered not as a resource for accessing phenomena of which the text describes but for documents to be viewed as *active*, thus we need to see a text as having 'a structuring effect, that actively organises a course of social action and that is consequential for that action, directing it in its course' (Watson 1997: 85). Within this thesis the assessment documents, as texts, are viewed as *active* in that it is through the reading and interpreting of the documents that a child's identities become known. Thereby within this thesis the assessment documents have been subject to analysis to unearth not only what the documents tell us about the children's identities, but also what they do not tell us.

Lieblich *et al.* (1998) suggest that the wide variation in approaches to narrative research can be described using two dimensions. First, analyses can be characterised by whether they examine the content of the form of narratives. Whereas some readings focus on the explicit content of an account, i.e., what happened and why, other readings pay less attention to the content and concentrate on the structure of the plot, its coherence or complexity, the style or genre of the narrative, and the choice of metaphors and other images that are invoked. Second, while some research attempts an holistic analysis which seeks to preserve a narrative in its entirety and understand it as a complete entity (as in the data from the participant children in this research), other analyses can be described as 'categorical' in that short sections of the text are extracted, classified, and placed into categories for analysis (as in the data from the adult participants in this research). Within this study the texts were subject to narrative analysis that considered content, form and function, with special attention played to the rhetorical devices employed by participants. The assessment documents were originally considered as a whole and then were subject to coding and categorisation. This made it possible me to consider initially the documents narrative purposes before their content was 'broken down' for the purposes of comparison to enable thematic analysis, thereby fulfilling the different aspects of the research questions.

At the level of interpreting the research there is the qualitative aim of discovering or entering the subjective experience. The notion that theory is created from or emerges from data is consistent with the view that understanding, knowledge and meanings are subjective, and emerges in interaction with others in a given context. Hence, the qualitative research framework entails a methodology in which theory is 'grounded' in data such as observations, interviews, conversations, written reports, texts, and their interpretations (Greig *et al.* 2007). However it is important to state here that no claim is made to the construction of grounded theory *per se* (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Instead, certain of the ideas associated with grounded theory have informed the approach taken to analysis and, rather than the development of new theory, the aim of this research has been to generate themes, insights, ideas and understandings (D'Cruz and Jones 2004).

All the assessment documents, and subsequently the transcribed interviews (see below), were coded and categorised, with coding employed as a means to generate thematic analyses. Seidel and Kelle (1995) advise that coding encompasses three main tasks: noticing relevant concepts, collecting examples of these concepts, and analysing these concepts in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns and structures. As such, fragments of the data were brought together into broader categories, which were defined by having some common property. Delamont (1992) suggests that during coding the researcher should be looking for patterns, themes, and regularities as well as contrasts, paradoxes, and irregularities. This process of coding thus linked all the elements of data to particular ideas and concepts and allowed the concepts to be thought about in new and different ways. Some concepts were closely linked to one another (e.g., attachment and intimacy) and emphasis was placed on establishing and thinking about such linkages (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

Further, because coding inevitably involves the reading and re-reading of data and making selections from the data, it involves re-interpreting the data set. At the stage of interpreting the data attention was paid to the rhetorical devices employed, for example, oracular reasoning (Mehan 1990), active voicing (Wooffitt 1992) and category entitlement (Potter 1996), and became part of the narrative analysis. Set out below is a section from the assessment data set about identity, to which I have attached a number of coding concepts by way of illustration (see over).

As outlined, this initial coding technique revealed a number of potential concepts (attachment, contact, family, social development, family friends) of which a number of sub-concepts could be linked (attachment – behaviour; family – mother, father, aunt and uncle). Through preliminary coding of the assessment documents there surfaced some twelve over-arching concepts beneath which were subsumed thirty-nine sub-concepts that helped focus this early aspect of the investigation. In coding these and other data I was mindful of Rodger's (1991:70) point that forms of coding and classification are 'ways of seeing', whilst simultaneously being 'ways of not seeing'. As Coffey and Atkinson (1996:32) note, 'codes are organising principles that

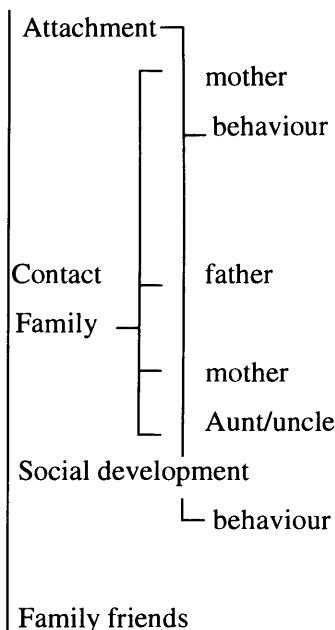
Alfie<sup>24</sup> demonstrates a clear and strong attachment to his mother.

He cries when he is separated from her and looks for her when she leaves the room.

It is doubtful that he will remember much about his father and does not have contact with that side of the family.

Alfie's mother states that he knows who his aunt and uncle are and is attached to them as well.

He enjoys other people's company and also knows and recognises his social worker and his mother's support worker as well as his mother's close friends.



are not set in stone. They are our own creations, in that we identify and select them ourselves. They are also tools to think with. They can be expanded, changed, or scrapped although as our ideas develop through repeated interactions with the data'.

There are computer packages for the analysis of qualitative data which search for key phrases and frequency with which certain words occur and in what context (e.g., NVivo) and although the utilisation of such packages was an option I was mindful of May's (2001) warning that the use of computer assisted analysis does not override the need to become familiar with the data. The convenience of the analysis should not be a reason for choosing one method of analysis over another. Therefore, despite a relatively large amount of transcribed material, I decided not to utilise a computer-assisted package for the study and opted to follow my own personal style of working which is more suited to close readings, re-readings and marking up of hard copies of documents rather than working from electronic documents. Thus from this initial manual procedure I reduced the concepts and sub-concepts derived from the assessments into six composite themes:

<sup>24</sup> Alfie, age 2 years. Core Assessment 4.

1. Personal understandings of identities, including appraisals of own identities.
2. Professional perspectives on identities – is identity as an assessment dimension distinct from personal views of identities?
3. How do practitioners get to *know* about identities:
  - a) What are the sources of information that practitioners' use when learning about children's identities?
  - b) What do practitioners report as 'good', useful evidence in terms of identities?
4. Practitioners' 'theoretical' understandings of identities
5. Tools employed by practitioners to help them understand how others construct identities
6. Practitioners' views about identity as an assessment dimension

By indexing the data in this way I was able to develop denser sets of themes and concepts. These themes were then re-explored and analytically 'tested' in practitioner interviews (Appendix 4 contains the generic practitioner interview schedule). It is to the interviews that I now turn.

### **Verbal constructions of identities - The Interviews**

Interviews can tell us something about the world outside the interview, not as facts, but as methods of talk, persuasion and explanation. Potter and Mulkay (1985:269) suggest:

...we have to assume that we can, in a more restricted sense, generalise from interviews to naturally occurring situations. For we are assuming that the interactional and interpretative work occurring in interviews resembles to some degree that which takes place outside the interviews.

As such, the interview data from this research is treated as transparent, offering direct access to social work activity outside of the interview (Hall 1997). There has been a growing awareness of the role of the interviewer in helping to construct, and not just collect, biographical information from participants (Stanley and Wise 1993; Maynard 1994; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Hollway and Jefferson 2000). Interviews inevitably implicate the social characteristics of the researcher and respondent such as gender, age, ethnicity, and the impact that these may have on the responses offered by the participant (Neuman and Kreuger 2003). However aspects of personal identity did not appear to affect participants' responses to me. Rather it was my professional identity as a practitioner that appeared to have most influence. This appeared notably with the children, parents and carers that I interviewed where my knowledge and experience of assessment practice seemed to aid lay participants' engagement with



me as they were used to talking to social workers. This question of researcher identity is an important part of the wider issue of reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to the subjective filters through which researchers study, analyse and present particular aspects of the social world (Denscombe 2003). The issue of whom and how the researcher is perceived as being - both by themselves and their respondents - thus becomes a significant dimension of the research process.

Prior to conducting the interviews I met with all participants, face-to-face, with the intention of reducing possible anxiety for interviewees and to reinforce the point that informed consent would be ensured. The children, parents and carers all seemed willing to be interviewed, by contrast some practitioners expressed concern about the questions in the interview rather than the process itself. Common remarks were:

*I'll do you an interview but I don't know if I'll be able to answer the questions!*  
*I'm not sure if I know anything about identity.*

As noted elsewhere (Birch 1998; Brockbank and McGill 1998; Trotter and Leech 2003) there exist some reluctance amongst social work students and practitioners to acknowledge or value their own knowledge and the above comments may be an example of this. However, in light of these remarks and to reduce the anxiety of the participants, I decided to offer all the participants the opportunity to view the interview schedule prior to the interview. All participants accepted this offer. Most of the practitioner interviews took place in the office setting, whereas children, parents and carers were interviewed in their own homes. This ensured that all participants were interviewed in an environment that was more 'naturalistic' to them and likely therefore to facilitate the process (Grieg *et al.* 2007).

Several authors suggest that ninety minutes is the optimum length for a qualitative research interview (Seidman 1998; Hermanowicz 2002). The length of interviews in this data set ranged from fifty minutes to two and a quarter hours. The interviews yielded transcripts of approximately twenty to thirty pages in A4 text (or approximately 15,000 to 20,000 words each). The interviews were audio recorded and generated a wealth of data of which only a relatively small percentage is reproduced here. Recording is generally thought to be good practice in all qualitative interviewing (Hermanowicz 2002). Elliot (2005:33) observes that without recording 'all kinds of

data are lost: the narrative itself, pauses, intonation, laughter'. With the permission of the participants, all the interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and shared with participants to ensure that they were reliable accounts. To ensure reliability and transparency transcriptions of the interviews were provided within two weeks and participants were offered the opportunity to delete any material that they felt did not adequately represent their intended meaning. No participant took up this opportunity.

When undertaking the interviews a flexible approach to questioning was employed whereby the respondent often led the process. This assisted in empowering the respondents and allowing their 'voice' to produce narrative accounts (see Mishler (1986: 118-119). This approach afforded me the opportunity to explore in depth with the participants issues that they raised as pertinent. My role as interviewer was not a silent one, with myself participating by asking the questions and encouraging the participant through non-verbal cues, short responses or utterances such as 'right' or 'hmm', and by asking additional questions or making statements. Thus opportunities were provided for the participants to discuss their own, or new ideas, and for me as the researcher to acquire in-depth rich material. Further, the flexible interviewing style afforded the opportunity to return to issues considered as pertinent to the participant and for myself to probe the validity of responses. This interviewing style ensured that each participant was given sufficient time to voice an opinion as I also wanted to use the interviews as a thought-provoking exercise. Therefore, I would frequently play 'devil's advocate' and present contrasting ideas to those of the participant. By using this technique I aimed to convey to the participants that I, as the researcher, was also attempting to conceptualise my own ideas and that I was learning from their input. As such, I was attempting to challenge interviewer bias, which is a frequent criticism of the semi-structured interview (Seidman 1998).

Following the interview, lay participants were offered a £10 gift voucher as an acknowledgement of their time and expertise. Participants were not advised of this until after the interviews in order to diminish the possibility of being involved in the research only for financial gain. The children were also given the same value gift that their parents and carers received in order to demonstrate to the child that their views were perceived by me to be of similar value to those of their parent/carers (see McKeganey [2001] for a discussion of the ethics of such payments).

The aim of my analysis was to enable rigorous comparison to be made between interviews while retaining the unique context of the data within each interview (Fielding and Thomas 2008). Further, by combining analysis of accounts given by practitioners, parent and carers and children in interview with analysis of the assessment documents, it was hoped that a 'fuller picture' (Baker 2008: 1466) could be obtained of how workers actually accomplished their assessments of children's identities.

### **Checking and clarifying: The use of questionnaires**

Following the commencement of my analysis of the practitioner interview data I came to notice that although I had striven for clarity in interviews, one area of enquiry had not been made explicitly clear, that of the distinction between 'formal' or 'informal' work practices. For example, in Chapter Ten, it is revealed how practitioners initially distinguish between spending time talking informally to children from direct work, which is described in a more 'clinical' manner, during which children were 'sat down' and direct work was 'done with them'. Although I had a relatively good idea of what I understood formal and informal work practices to mean, the data did not provide evidence of what practitioners understood by these terms and clarification was needed to ensure that I represented their views accurately. Therefore practitioners were asked to complete a summative rating questionnaire asking them to rank on a scale of one to ten their practice style as either formal or informal in regard to ten practice examples gleaned from the interviews. Ten practitioners completed this task. Their composite score and related discussion is set out in Chapters Six and Nine.

### **Promoting Competence - Multi-methods with Children**

When planning this research a primary aim was to ensure that the views of the children were heard and treated as valid as the views of adult participants. As Roberts (2000: 238) notes, 'listening to children is central to recognising and respecting their worth as human beings'. As such the structure of the research was intended to conceptualise children as active participants:

Children as active participants take part willingly in research that has flexible methods: semi-structured interviews with scope for detailed personal accounts, exploring topics through focus groups or drama, diaries, photos or videos, paintings or maps

created by the children. Increasingly, children are involved in planning, directing, conducting and/or reporting research projects. (Alderson 2005: 30).

As de Saint-Exupery ([1945] 1995) observed, adults cannot on their own examine the world from the child's point of views and therefore we need children to explain it to us. Within this study children are seen as active constructors of their own identities, thus the underlying thrust is one of children as authentic informants of their own experience (Danby and Baker 2001). Young and Barrett (2001:383), undertaking research with street children, state that children are becoming increasingly recognised as 'meaning-producing beings' in studies exploring children's location and geography and it is the notion of children as 'meaning producing beings' which guided this enquiry.

My own work in the field had led me to recognise that frequently children's feedback and accounts are not routinely sought in practice (see Smith *et al* 1998; Thomas and O'Kane 2000; Munro 2001, for examples). Commonly children are a socially silenced group (Edwards and Alldred 1999), or as Mason and Steadman (1997) prefer, a 'muted group' who are denied participation on the basis of their supposed immaturity and 'incompetence' (see also Brannen and O'Brien 1996). The assumption therefore has long been held that children are either unable or not entitled to have a point of view. Further, and predictably, the younger the child, the less likely the child is to be heard in research (Greig and Taylor 1998: 46). Thus within this study I was keen to hear the views from as many children as possible. This, however, was necessarily restricted by the process of gate keeping (as discussed above); the children's willingness and time to participate in the research; and the children's ability to articulate their views.

Christensen and James (2000) emphasise that when undertaking research with children, forming a relationship in which the children feel that they want to participate throughout the research process is particularly important in order to keep up a continuing dialogue over which children, as well as researchers, feel they have control. More time was required and invested in the research relationship with children than for example, with the practitioners, parents and carers in this study, to ensure that the children were familiar enough with me to want to participate in the

research, but also to ensure that the children understood what I was researching and why their views were so important to me. Therefore, unlike the adult participants, my meetings with the children were spread over two or three weeks and I visited, usually, three or four times with the children. The first meeting was organised as an introductory meeting, during which the children were encouraged to ask me questions and share experiences with me. The parents and carers participating in this visit assisted this.

In communicating effectively with children I had years of experience from which to reflect on methods that worked well and those that were less successful. In line with Parton and O'Brien's (2000) suggestion of the value of developing a common language with service users, when speaking with the subject children I was careful to avoid jargon and ensured that the child and myself fully understood one another. For example, I would listen to how the children referred to significant others and used similar terms, such as 'Bampy' rather than 'Granddad', 'Benita' rather than 'your social worker' (also see Garbarino and Stott 1989). Further, I was also aware that, like adults, children have a desire to please and therefore made sure that no matter what response the child gave my response was one of acceptance and acknowledgement and that my involvement in children's different forms of research participation was as non-directive and non-intrusive as possible to ensure that it was the child's 'voice' and not mine (as in Lewis and Lindsay 2000).

Within the study my role as the researcher was made as transparent as possible, with myself as researcher becoming the facilitator of activities and scribe. The activities that the children undertook were kept by the children, and with the consent of the children, during the activity I would take notes (as described in Chapter Ten) and the children would feedback their work to me, with me taking notes from the content of the activities but also how the children described them to me. As such, through acting as a scribe, rather than as commentator or critic of their views, I hoped that the children would feel safe to share their views with me (MacNaughton and Smith 2005). Rather than being limited to answering questions from my own agenda, or trying to give 'correct' or 'best' answers (O'Kane 2000), the children were viewed as active constructors of their own participation. As such, in scribing the children's ideas, feelings and perspectives, I wished to be perceived as giving 'witness' (Lather

2000) to their views. Further, the children were active in the collecting of the data – telling me what to scribe, checking that what I had recorded was ‘correct’ and if the children wished, controlling the dictaphone.

To repeat, allowing a child’s agenda to take precedence and allowing them choice in how they wanted to express themselves afforded the children control over their own participation and provided them with the opportunity to define their own means of representation. As such, an aim of my model of engagement with the children was intended to build their confidence. These principles were also reflected in the choice of the multi-method approach to collecting the views of the children. Nieuwenhuys (1996: 54-55) found that the ‘preferred activities of children such as games, story telling and drawing may be more effective in bringing out the complexities of their experience than methods and techniques used by/with adults’. This is reflected in Holland (2009:6) whose young participants were involved in determining the research methods and ‘chose to generate data through informal interviews, film, photography, animation, diary-keeping and drawing’. However Christensen and James (2000: 2) advise ‘research with children does not necessarily entail adopting different or particular methods...like adults, children can and so participate in structured and unstructured interviews; they fill in questionnaires; and, on their own terms, they allow the participant observer to join with them in their daily lives’. I was careful that my design for data collection with the children did not imply an adult/child distinction and therefore children were offered a semi-structured interview, such as those undertaken by their parents, carers and social workers, in an attempt to ensure that the children felt parity in the choices offered to them. Further, a multi-method approach was decided upon to support and recognise the diverse ways in which children from diverse backgrounds might feel most able to share their ideas with me (MacNaughton *et al.* 2003). This approach is strongly supported by the work of researchers attempting to develop more participatory approaches to research with young people and children (see O’Kane 2000).

In total, seven different research methods were undertaken with the children, with the aim that the participating children would be comfortable with completing at least one of the exercises. A range of techniques was offered to the children to enable them to participate in exercises that made ‘human sense’ to them (Donaldson 1978). Although

the exercises chosen may be determined as chronologically organised, for example, drawing could be perceived as a task devised for the younger children, interviews for older participants, the setting of specific age limits to the activities of children (denoting levels of intellectual achievement in relation to age, prescribing children's participation in particular social spaces whilst proscribing others, as noted by James 1993) was avoided by offering all the children the choice of all the methods. Thus the children were given freedom to choose what exercise they undertook and how many exercises they completed. Their composite data set is outlined in Table 5 below:

**Table 5: Methods with children**

Research strategy	Attempted	Completed	Age of child (at task)	Gender of child	Discussed in Chapter
Photo Diary	8	5	10, 12, 13, 15 & 16	M = 4 F = 1	10
Who knows me best?	4	4	10, 11 & 16	M = 2 F = 1	10
What I know about my social worker/ What my social worker knows about me	2	2	11 & 16	M = 1 F = 16	5
A Story About Me	4	4	5, 10, 11 & 16	M = 3 F = 1	10
My Ideal Social Worker	0	0			
Interviews:					
Formal	1	1	12	M = 1	10
During drawing	3	3	4, 5 & 5	M = 1: F = 2	10
Photo elicitation	5	5	10, 12, 13, 15 & 16	M = 4: F = 1	10
Drawing	3	3	4, 5 & 5	M = 1 F = 2	10

The above range ensured that the children were offered as many opportunities as possible to express their views in a manner that they felt competent in (Thomas and O'Kane 2000). The exercises that the children were invited to undertake were brief in

nature, hence much of the data obtained is re-produced verbatim in Chapter Ten. Each method will now be discussed briefly.

### **Photo diaries**

The aim of the photo diary technique was to provide the children with the opportunity to show me their life 'how it is'. The children were provided with a disposable camera to take photographs of 'what is important to me'. A time for me to collect the completed films was agreed with the children. Once the films were developed, the children were provided with a choice of either a scrapbook or a photo album to present their photographs in and I would act as scribe as the children created their scrapbooks or albums, noting the content of the photographs selected and what the children shared about the pictures and/or the title/remark the children attached to their photographs. As I did not seek to keep copies of the children's photographs but rather employed this form of visual material to elicit verbal data then the issue of consent was unproblematic (see Wiles *et al.* 2008). This research exercise was unsurprisingly, the most popular choice with the children and according to the children the 'best' of my multi-method approach.

### **Who knows me best?**

In this technique the children were asked to share their views on who in their lives knew them the best. Three children undertook this task, all of them choosing to record their views as a written list.

### **What I know about my social worker/what my social worker knows about me**

The aim of this exercise was to grasp some understanding of the extent to which the children felt that their social workers knew them in some depth and to ascertain whether the children perceived this knowledge sharing as an exchange of information or as a one-way process. This exercise was informative in the sense that the two children appeared to know little if anything about their social workers but believed the workers knew much about them. Their written comments were but a few words and have not been integrated into the findings in this study.



### **A story about me**

Encouraging children to tell their stories of lived contemporary childhoods (as in James 1993) repositions the children as ‘the subjects, rather than the objects of research’ (Christensen and James 2000:3), and were central aims underlying this research method. In asking children to tell their own story I provided the children with no suggestions or advice on what to write (however, see James 1993:134, for story-line prompts). Four children chose to write me their stories and were brief in nature. The freedom the children were afforded in the research process may have affected the length of their stories, for in example, Robbie decided to end his story abruptly when a friend called and he left to play outside.

### **My ideal social worker**

This technique (see McLeod 2008) was included to reaffirm to the children that their views, on a range of aspects that impacted on their lives was important to me. Further, I wanted to reaffirm to the children that they are consumers of a service, and therefore had the right to share their views about the services they received. None of the children chose to undertake this task and later the children were asked why? Their response was that they considered this task to be ‘boring’, evidenced not least by a shared screwing up of noses! Only three of the participating children continued to receive social work intervention, and none of these three children mentioned their social workers in their work with me. Thus, as in Holland (2009), it would appear that social workers might not be perceived by children as significant role-players in their day-to-day lives.

### **Interviews**

As noted above, I was keen to offer the children the opportunity to share their views with me via an interview, as the children were all aware that I had interviewed their parents, carers and social workers. Thus the inclusion of this research technique was aimed at demonstrating to the children that their views were considered as equal to those of the adult participants. Though using young people as interviewers might have given me a different perspective and enriched my data (Kellett 2006), I chose to carry out the interviews myself. This meant that my interviews formed in effect a microcosm of the whole project – a social worker learning about children’s identities – and could be analysed as such (McLeod 2008). Only one child chose to be

‘formally’ interviewed, although the photo elicitation sessions and talking to the children during their drawing activities may be conceptualised as interviews. This ‘formal’ interview took place within the family home, with the subject child seemingly to particularly enjoy the barring of his siblings from the front room so that the interview could occur uninterrupted. The questions for this interview focused on gaining the child’s own view, and as with the adult interviews in this study, caution was taken to ensure that the child was afforded as much scope as possible whilst limiting the opportunities for me to ‘coach’ the participant. Interviewing children, as social workers are aware, requires careful management for as Greig *et al.* (2007: 126) remind us ‘the real voice of the child, is to be found in the core of the onion and it is the use of special interview techniques that will get us there’. This interview was subject to the same process of systematic coding and comparison as the other participant interviews.

### **Drawings**

I had not planned to employ art as one of the methods as I did not feel confident in its analysis. As Grieg *et al.* suggest, ‘children’s drawings are believed to reveal the child’s inner mind’ (2007:79) and are particularly susceptible to false interpretations by the researcher. However, it became readily apparent that younger children were more comfortable and confident drawing pictures of themselves rather than talking to me about themselves and their day-to-day lives. Furthermore, once the children were drawing I noticed that greater use could be made of what they verbally described as they drew their pictures than what was contained in the pictures themselves (see Chapter Ten).

Although this multi-method approach to collecting data from the children was planned to ensure that they each felt they had control of what they shared with me, and when, this did create some restrictions within the research process. Firstly, this posed challenges for the comparative analysis of data from the different sources (see below). Secondly, my positioning the children as ‘managers’ of their own research experience meant that the issues discussed were limited to those they felt important and were willing to share. Encouraging the children to share what was important to them meant that I could not guarantee that the children would raise issues pertinent to my research questions. Therefore, as O’Kane (2000) observes, the reasons why

children decide not to share some information in these sorts of circumstances remains unknown.

### **Re-presentation of views and feedback**

As the researcher and author of the study, I hold a duty to ensure that the participants' views are represented in an honest and authentic manner, a value promulgated by a number of researchers (Daly and Lumley 2005; Corden and Sainsbury 2005, 2006). Re-presenting an authentic account of the participant's view is important in ensuring that the research is reliable and valid. A distinction is usually made between internal and external validity, the former refers to the ability to produce results that are not simply an artefact of the research design, and external validity is a measure of how far the findings can be generalised to apply to a broader population (Elliott 2005). It is internal validity that is of greater relevance here<sup>25</sup> for as Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 52) and Fook (2001) observe, the researcher *is* the lens through which s/he sees the world and hence reflexivity is an indispensable requirement of the research act in order to be aware of how we inevitably impose value and relevance in the way we study, observe and account for our research (see Riesman 1994:135; MacDonald 1996). Therefore I was at pains to recognise the effects within my research of my identity as being something of a hybrid of insider and outsider (see Darlington and Scott 2002: 43). I was an insider in terms of past employment within the setting and experienced in undertaking social work assessments of children; I was an outsider in that I was no longer involved in statutory child care and had moved into the academic field. Similarly, Bonner and Tolhurst (2002: 18) describe their experience as nurse researchers conducting participant observation and conclude that 'the position of nurse researcher as both 'insider' and 'outsider' provides a unique opportunity'. Such duality characterised this research where much was already known and understood by me on the basis of direct experience but much also was yet to be learned; not least how to ensure maintenance of the 'critical self-awareness' advocated by Northway (2002: 6).

In attempting to ensure validity in this research I sought to ensure that the participant and myself jointly agree the meanings contained in the material collected from the

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<sup>25</sup> The external validity of this thesis is discussed in Chapter Eleven.

interviews and methods with children. For example, throughout the interview process I interjected if I felt that the participant's response was unclear in order to ensure that I understood what the participant was saying. Further I provided timely transcribed accounts of the interview data to each participant for their own editing in order to ensure accuracy and validity. In terms of the multi-method approach with the children, I ensured that the child explained to me their meanings, and that all the children agreed the notes I took during our meetings. This 'checking' of my notes was an exercise that the children seemed to particularly enjoy, reinforcing to them, I believe, that an accurate account of their views was what I wanted and reaffirming that their views were important to me.

When it came to deciding what data to present in this thesis it was necessary to be selective. On matters of selection, Clifford (1998:50) argues that quotations are often 'staged' by authors and tend to serve as confirming testimonies. Scott (2002) states that qualitative data is susceptible to selective bias and representation in that a researcher may try to find and present only what supports their preferred perspective. Consequently, Scott states that it is important to systematically and rigorously search the data for disconfirming evidence. Therefore, I was mindful that my representation of the data would require care to ensure that participant responses did not lose their meaning and that an authentic representation of their views were included in my analysis.

## **Summary**

Within this chapter I have outlined the key elements of a case study design that comprises textual analysis, qualitative interviewing and child-specific data gathering techniques as the core methods of enquiry. Throughout, I have striven to ensure that the analysis of the data is driven by unearthing differences as well as similarities. Ethical principles have been at the forefront of a design, which has sought parity of voice for children with those of adults. My own closeness to the research topic and setting was influential in gaining access and building rapport with participants, however I deployed a rigorous and reflexive approach to both role and analysis to ensure my familiarity with the field of social work did not prevent me from making the setting 'strange' and from viewing the world through a research as opposed to a

social work lens. It is towards this world we now turn in the first of the findings chapters, which introduces the setting, the workers and their assessments.

## **Chapter Six**

### **The artful construction of identities as an assessment task**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter introduces the research findings and in doing so begins with exploring the task of assessing identity. By drawing from the practitioner interview and assessment document data this chapter will demonstrate that assessing identities is a complex and iterative process of engagement and elucidation over time whereby all manner of perceived personal, familial and environmental attributes are scrutinised in order to categorise an 'identity'. Thus, the chapter will reveal these processes and practitioners' interpretive work and in doing so indicate that 'identity' in assessment is an artful construction mediated by multiple knowledges, contexts, and opportunities. In this respect identity is a contingent and cumulative phenomenon and will be illuminated in this chapter by reference to workers' own accounts about the resources they use to accomplish this aspect of assessment work.

#### **The Value of Narrative**

The use of narrative in professional practice is recognised in research (Manning 1986; Hall 1997; Taylor and White 2000) with practitioners' use of rhetorical and narrative skills seen as constitutive of their professional expertise (Pithouse and Atkinson 1988). Cases, and the information that construct them, do not simply exist as narrative but become narrative via professional construction and accomplishment. For example, Manning (1986) explores how police officers reduce complex situations into 'mini narratives' in order to enable the routine tasks of processing and reconstruction. He also observes how stories or narratives are 'a framed bit of culture' (297) reflecting the temporal, cultural and purposive specificity of this professional task. As such it may be unsurprising that a key finding from the analysis of the thirty-two assessment documents in this study is that practitioners appear to prefer to present their assessments of children's identities as a narrative: a story about the child.

How practitioners choose to present their assessments is important, as assessment is a process with the completed document being the 'final word' in this process, bringing together the information collated to enable practitioners to formulate their appraisal of

risk and protective factors. As McDevitt (1994) observes, whilst case file records (of which assessments are constitutive) may not be vital pieces of information for the practitioner who creates them, subsequent workers will make sense of a case in part from what is recorded on file. Thus the contents of case files, such as assessments, as a source of information and sense making may exist long after the creator and are thereby intrinsic components of the life-long construction of a case. However, practitioners are primarily the sole authors of case file accounts. For example, in their study of Dutch adoption assessment procedures Noordegraaf *et al.* (2009:95) demonstrate how practitioners transform prospective adopters own accounts of their life stories into ‘a coherent, persistent record’, which is then employed to support the practitioners’ recommendation to either approve, or not, the prospective carers. It is my assertion that a similar process can be observed in this study.

By presenting their assessments of children’s identities as narrative accounts, practitioners are continuing the process of construction, creating meaning through the stories they tell. As Gubrium and Holstein (1998:166) observe:

Narration is constructive, a way of fashioning the semblance of meaning and order for experience. Storytelling can thus be likened to composing written text, or even music, in that it involves the organisation of what might be imagined as experiential ‘chaos’ into coherent and decipherable forms.

It can thereby be suggested that practitioners’ narrative representations of children’s identities are the end product of a complex and iterative process of engagement and elucidation in order to become organised and structured dimensions of assessment. Although it is recognised that most forms of standardised recording systems demand a narrative account of events (see Taylor and White 2000), there is no prerequisite within the practice guidance that an assessment of a child’s identities should be presented as a narrative. It is thus possible that practitioners are employing narrative as a resource: a device practitioners choose to use (as suggested by Pithouse and Atkinson 1988). As Hall (1997:6) observes:

Narrative is seen as a way that people package events and experiences into a performance for others. These narrative performances anticipate the audience and guard against adverse reactions and potential criticism, as listeners are instructed to

interpret what they hear. Stories persuade, surprise and entertain and in the process, the authority of the storyteller is constituted.

The identity sections within the data set of thirty-two assessments were all constructed as narrative accounts, in which the ‘story’ of the child’s identities was built from descriptions of the child accompanied by descriptive accounts of the child’s familial and social circumstances (such as Cerys’ and Dominic’s identity sections, pp. 114 and 118). As will be shown below, the implicit voice of the narrative was commonly that of the practitioner and by presenting their assessment of a child’s identities in the form of narrative, rather than say for example, an objective listing of factual evidence<sup>26</sup>, the practitioners claim ownership for their assessments as the creator and narrator. It is the practitioner and not the child who decides *what* should be included within the identity section and as Hall (1997) and Taylor (2006:201) cite:

A prime function of the narrative is to persuade the reader of the authenticity of the story and the credibility of its teller. Whilst the narrator cannot control how their account is received, they can work with artfulness to get the listener/reader on their side.

As such, the account becomes their story as much as that of the child. This chapter explores these narrative practices further, using the specific examples of where information is gleaned from and the use of theory to delineate some of the components that lend weight and authority to the voice of the practitioners as narrator.

### **The use of information in assessment of identities**

Seymour (2006) observes the close relationship between information and knowledge in the accomplishment of social work practice. It is the task of the practitioner to organise, summarise and make sense of the information they receive from their face-to-face encounters with clients and other professionals as well as other sources of information, such as case files (Webb, S. 2006). As Goffman (1983:17) advises, practitioners (as professionals) are ‘in a position to give official imprint to versions of reality’ with case files being an important expression of the institutional mandate (Goffman 1968a). However how and what practitioners record is changing. Recent studies into the implementation of electronic databases, such as the Integrated

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<sup>26</sup> Chapter Ten includes an example of evidence presented in this manner, with a ‘wish list’ completed by a child recorded verbatim in the ‘child’s view’ section of the assessment.



Children's System and ContactPoint, demonstrate the influence of these electronic systems upon what and how information is recorded, suggesting that the use of e-pathways encourages practitioners to reconstruct 'knowledge' as 'information' in order to fit with the requirements of the electronic task (Parton 2008; Shaw *et al.* 2009; White *et al.* 2009).

With the exception of four of the thirty-two Core Assessments in the data set, two of which refer to the findings of psychological assessments of the subject children, practitioners use of information within identity sections, compared to other assessment domains (e.g., health), was marked by a lack of explicit sources. Compare, for example, the following extracts both taken from an assessment of the needs of a six-month-old child:

**Health:** Health visitors have routinely seen Cerys since her birth, one at the residential unit and also more recently within her own community. Both have noted pleasing progress with weight and developmental stages. Miss Carter [mother] has engaged positively with all clinic appointments. Cerys has reached all her developmental milestones. The health visitor reported to the Looked After Children's review on the [date] that she had no concerns over Cerys. Her parents were fully aware of the importance of a proactive approach with their daughters health needs. Cerys has received all her immunisations and is a bright lively child with an endearing personality.

**Identity:** Early indications suggest that Miss Carter and Mr Peterson [father] are bonding with Cerys. Cerys has been responsive to her parents' voice and all interactions are of a positive nature. The early positive bonding experiences have resulted in the formation of strong attachments. Cerys has received a very good standard of care and has thrived throughout her early development stage. She has been afforded a sense of stability enabling her to develop a sound sense of identity within her family unit.

*Cerys, age 6 months. Core Assessment 29.*

As the reader will note, the health section for Cerys provides what we might infer as an expected example of multi-agency work within assessment practice. Within the health section the health visitor is brought into the assessment as an independent witness. Bringing witnesses into assessments in this way can be seen as an attempt to establish 'fact': the greater number of witnesses in solidarity, the more likely the

information will be accepted as ‘fact’ (as in Hall 1997). We can also note that the practitioner has reiterated terminology from the health visitor as an explicit source of information to demonstrate the child’s development (*has reached all her developmental milestones*) and has reported the speech of the health visitor (*the health visitor reported...*) to reinforce the claims made in the assessment (Hall 1997). As such, the practitioner has bolstered her assessment through supporting statements from another professional (Stanley 2007). By contrast within the identity section the sources of evidence become less explicit. It is unclear who has observed the ‘*early indications*’ regarding the interactions between Cerys and her parents and although it may be understood that these observations are those of the practitioner (and possibly the health visitor), the source of evidence within the identity section is opaque. This may suggest that the practitioner was less comfortable in making explicit his/her own assessment of Cerys’ identity as a source of evidence or that explicit knowledge as to a child’s identities are less readily grasped or available to practitioners. In developing this latter point, consider the following extracts from the two identity sections, which make use of the views of psychologists:

In terms of Nancy's sense of self, it appears from Dr Matthews’ report that it is very fragile and that although she has a happy, friendly demeanour, it is apparent from what she has told Dr Matthews that she does not like herself and indeed has a very negative view of herself.

*Nancy, age 11. Core Assessment 8 (combined assessment)*

Yusef has developed an attachment to his mother. The attachments that have been identified during the Clinical Psychology assessment were said to be of a reactive attachment disorder.

*Yusef, age 7. Core Assessment 17.*

Here we can observe how the views of independent witnesses - the psychologists – have been summarised within the children’s identity sections. As can be noted the views of the psychologists appear as ‘self-evident’ features of the assessment: they appear as ‘fact’. Although the practitioner in the first extract does identify contradictory information (*although she has a happy, friendly demeanour*) this is followed by an attempt to reinforce the ‘expert’ status of the psychologist - *it is apparent from what she has told Dr Matthews...* Here we can observe, as suggested by Atkinson (2004), that professionals place information deemed to be factual in a

different position from other information that is to be distinguished from ‘fact’. Thereby, above, we can observe how in order to bolster their assessments the practitioners invoke the accounts of other professionals to add a lamination of ‘fact’ and in doing so enhance the authority of both their assessment and their professional identity (see Smith 1978; Trevithick 2005; Stanley 2007).

With the exception of the two assessments that noted the views of psychologists, only two other assessments made explicit reference to the information on which their assessments of a child’s identities were based. For example,

...From discussions with social work staff and her foster carer and from observations of her behaviour in contact, it appears that she has a very significant sense of belonging to her immediate family members...

*Stephanie, age 4 years. Core Assessment 2.*

...Alfie’s mother states that he knows who his aunt and uncle are and is attached to them as well...

*Alfie, age 2 years. Core Assessment 4*

These extracts from the children’s identity sections demonstrate how practitioners’ assessments of children’s identities can comprise items and ideas collected from a number of sources (the views of parents, carers, other social work professionals and of course observations from direct contact). Here it is suggested that the practitioners have provided explicit reference to how they have undertaken the assessment of the child’s identities and who they have consulted. These are examples of what Wooffitt (1992) describes as ‘active voicing’ – the use of the speaker’s own reported talk (as in the first extract: *[f]rom discussions with social work staff...*) or, as in the second instance, the inclusion of other’s talk: *Alfie’s mother states...* De Fina (2003) observes how reported speech can be a useful rhetorical device for practitioners in achieving a desired aim, in these instances providing ‘evidence’ of who has participated within the assessment. However caution is necessary when making decisions based on such accounts for as Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998:225) note, the author or speaker may report talk ‘when in fact it is unlikely, or in some cases impossible, that the words so reported were actually said in that way’<sup>27</sup>. As such, the informational worth of these

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<sup>27</sup> A proposed example of this can be located within Chapter Nine.

sources in the identity sections would appear to be located in explaining who participated within the assessment and in affirming the congruence of the practitioner's assessment rather than providing alternative views of the child's identities. Further, closer examination suggests that what appears to have been gathered, as in Yusef's extract above, is not the views of significant others with regard to the children's identities, but rather examples of children's identities explained through their attachments. This unearths a notion of attachment as a proxy for identities in childhood, a recurrent theme within the assessment documents and one that we will return to.

Following Mead's ideas on reflexivity (1934) it may appear that it is acceptable for practitioners to *know* the views of others (including the views of the child) and it is perhaps tacitly implied that practitioners will reflect the views of others within assessments. However not explicitly presenting these views within the assessment document removes ownership from the discloser, placing the practitioner in the powerful position of *knower* and 'creates the impression of the possession of an objective and detached point of view...that bolsters a view of the social worker as benevolent expert' (Milner and O'Byrne 2009: 176). Further by omitting the sources of information it may be suggested that the practitioner is fortuitously acting to protect others from potential harm if their views become known, creating a virtuous function for the practitioner as protector of information, positioning the discloser(s) as objects in need of protection. Thus, practitioners appear to hold a significant degree of discretion in deciding what to consider as valid information and how to present this information in the assessment document.

We have observed briefly how practitioners employ information from others within their assessments of children's identities. In these instances the views from others appear to be unquestionable and unchallenged due to their 'out-there-ness' (Latour 1987:23). However, the identity sections that made sources of information explicit formed a very small section of the sample (four out of thirty-two, 12.5%). More commonly practitioners tended not to make explicit the sources upon which their assessments of children's identities were based. As the following identity section, presented here in its entirety, reveals, more typically such sections contain a wealth of

information without reference to how the practitioner collated and tested the evidence and formed his/her professional opinion:

Dominic presents as a caring child who is aware that he is the oldest of 3 siblings. Dominic presents as being very confused and angry about his position within his family. He seems unclear about his role as either the man of the house or a child having no male role model and the need to crave attention from his mother as a child. He understands and can name the members of his family but after witnessing a considerable amount of both physical and emotional abuse Dominic manipulates relationships with family members to get his own way. In doing this Dominic can become quite aggressive and place him and others at risk.  
*Dominic, age 13 years. Core Assessment 10.*

The above identity section contains some compelling moral constructions (see Valentine 1996; Meyer, 2007) with regard to Dominic and his relationships with family members. Within the extract Dominic is presented as *caring yet confused and angry*. He is noted as displaying aggression and places *him [self] and others at risk*. Thereby the reader is encouraged to consider another, potential, identity for Dominic. By presenting the assessment as a narrative the practitioner is employing the technique of framing (as in Vojak 2009; see also Goffman 1974) to demonstrate how whilst Dominic may be perceived as a child in need, there exists also another need: to protect others *from* him. By omitting how the practitioner has come to *know* these ‘facts’ and reached his/her professional opinion, the practitioner has implicitly asserted his/her powerful position as ‘*knower*’. To repeat, quite how the practitioner has come to *know* this information remains unstated and (hypothetically) opens the possibility of the practitioner’s judgment to be questioned. As the majority of identity sections in this data set (87.5%) do not make their sources of information explicit it would appear that practitioner constructions of identities do not routinely warrant explicit evidential accounting (as in Taylor and White 2006) and we now explore possible reasons why.

### **Locating sources of information**

It may appear somewhat surprising that in this age of evidence informed practice (Alderson *et al.* 1996; MacDonald 1998; van de Luitgaarden 2009) practitioners continue to make highly significant statements about a child’s nature, history and

future welfare without making the foundations of their concerns explicit. The prevalence of such practice, specifically noted here in the assessment of children's identities, begs the question of how practitioners conceptualise the relationship between professional judgment and external sources of information. As noted by Baker (2008) and Munro (1998), it would appear that practitioners are able to draw information from a number of sources but can struggle to present their findings effectively. However, for the purpose of this enquiry, my interest turns to consider what practitioners view as useful sources of information in their assessments of children's identities. My findings from this area of enquiry are incorporated into this and later chapters in this study.

During interviews practitioners made frequent reference to potential sources of information and to clarify the nature of these sources I searched the interview data and collated the examples practitioners had suggested in interview. These sources were then reproduced in the form of a summative rating scale questionnaire, with practitioners asked to grade in order of their perceived value (see Chapter Five). Data from the questionnaires practitioners completed post interview indicated that workers rated observations of children, informal discussions with children and their families, Core Assessment sessions and direct work with children as the most useful sources of information for assessment purposes. All these sources of information have in common the child, parent and carer as the primary source of information and later chapters explore how practitioners utilise this information in greater depth.

In contrast to the above, practitioners rated gossip, evidence from court, multi-agency referral forms, information from case files, and discussions held during meetings (such as Core Group meetings, Looked After Children reviews, professional and/or advocate meetings, etc) as less useful in helping them assess children's identities. This challenges the findings of Beckett *et al.* (2007) who state that evidence from 'laboratory conditions' (e.g., a meeting in an office) are often given more weight than observations 'in the field' (e.g., a child seen within the home environment). The feedback from the questionnaires suggests that although it would appear that these sources of information are undoubtedly useful in some areas of assessment, they rarely contained information that addressed the child's identities and therefore were not considered as useful in understanding a child's identities. Thereby to glean

insights pertinent to a child's identity practitioners appeared to rely upon information directly gained from the child, parent, and carer in situations that may be considered as child or client led. By contrast, it appeared that where sources of information were professional-led, such as in the court arena and statutory meetings, this in some way acted as a barrier to 'useful' information being shared in terms of understanding a child's identities, a point that I discuss next.

***'It's about getting into the real environment': Building on the mundane and intimate***

In determining why there appeared to be a distinction between the relevance and provenance of sources of information I came to consider whether there existed some perceived disparity in the quality of the information gained from different sources. In interview, practitioners were asked to consider *in your opinion are formal or more informal styles of information gathering most useful in the assessment of children's identities?* Responses suggested that although informal sources of information gathering were generally seen as more useful, practitioners utilised a flexible approach to information gathering. For example:

I think informal is more useful, building a rapport, building a relationship and so I think, well that's one of the pitfalls in social work that people don't, they think you're wasting time, but it's about getting into the real environment. You can't just sweep into someone's life and give them this kind of formal interview, in terms of social work service and then whisk off again and everything's ok. You're dealing with personal issues, life. They are giving you all their private information and that is a massive thing and so to formalise that is not natural at all. Or so I think.  
*Alison, student social worker.*

I think that you just have to do it in whatever you can and I certainly wouldn't stick to a formal way of doing it. You can have a chat to a foster carer on the telephone. You can draw that information out. You can do it through LAC reviews, you know, and direct work. So I think every possible source can contribute to that.

*And have you found that either formal or informal is more useful?*

I think informal, because people tend to be on their guard if you do it in a formal way. Because you can pick up so much information from an informal chat. You know, even if it's only a conversation in the middle of the street, you know, and I think that that can be a lot more useful sometimes.

*Frances, social worker.*

From the above extracts it appears that practitioners may tend to prefer informal methods of information gathering, such as *a chat to a foster carer on the telephone* or *a conversation in the middle of the street* as useful means of gaining information about a child's identities. Thereby it would appear that practitioners exercise some discretion when deciding whether to employ a more intended sense of the professional self by adopting an air of formality and procedure in their practice (rather than engaging in informal, loosely structured exchanges) and appear concerned that formality will act as a barrier to gaining knowledge about the mundane, day-to-day lives of children. However, as noted by Frances (above), some practitioners recognise opportunities to engage at this depth into the lives of children through more formal, intended means, such as the examples given of Looked After Children review meetings or direct work. As such the possibility of gaining useful information in such arenas is not entirely excluded, with some practitioners recognising opportunities to gain information about a child's identities in a number of settings.

It would appear that it is the mundane facts about children, which can help the practitioner feel that they *know* the child and can be seen as useful when assessing children's identities:

Well it's nice when you are dropping a child back off at placement, it's nice to just chat to the foster carer. See how the child has been and have a little listen to the funny things that they did, which you don't often get in reviews, because they're quite rigid questions and I think that people can feel a bit intimidated by the chair ... I think that the little things are really important. Um, you know, what toy the child goes to bed with, things like that. Whether they like peas rather than carrots. I think that that's really important, because that's what's important to the child. You know, not about what statistics they are reaching in school. I think that if you just, well obviously there's a level of that because we have to do that as social workers, but to really get in there and know what that child likes, and who they are, it's about the little things.

*Chantelle, social worker.*

Thus it is suggested that learning about *the little things* about children's lives, such as *what toy the child goes to bed with* or *whether they like peas rather than carrots* helps practitioners understand not only *what's important to the child* but also *who they [the children] are*. It is perhaps not surprising that such information is gained from the child, parent and carer as this information is not commonly shared within more formal



settings, such as Child Protection Case Conferences, which are seen to be ‘dominated, or colonized (to use the Habermasian term), by the voice of the “system”’ (Hayes and Houston 2007: 994). It is within the contexts of informality that practitioners acquire knowledge of the mundane and intimate, with informality seen as a tool employed by practitioners to encourage the self-disclosure by children and their care-givers of intimate details of their day-to-day lives. As Aron (2003) explains, self-disclosure is seen as associated with (or leading to) intimacy, closeness, connectedness, or even a merging of self and others. Further, self-disclosure has been seen to assist in understanding attachments and assessing relationships (Keelan *et al.* 1998). As such, it would appear possible that informality in a practitioner’s working style not only enables workers to learn, and subsequently report on, the day-to-day intimacies of familial life but also to glean information as to the relationships within the family. Further, the possession of this intimate knowledge about the child’s life appears to enable practitioners to *feel* that they understand the child, justifying their credibility to construct an identity for that child. The routine omission of these *little things* from the assessment document<sup>28</sup> suggests that knowledge of the mundane and intimate is part of a process of discovery, learning and information sharing, the foundation upon which the child’s identities are constructed.

### **The Multiplicity of Identities - Balancing different perspectives of the child**

As noted above, practitioners’ constructions of children’s identities draw from numerous sources and presenting oneself as independent, impartial and fair are an effective means to assert one’s credibility as a fact-giver (Taylor and White 2000). As such, by utilising professional and lay sources within their constructions of children’s identities, practitioners not only reflect the interactive nature of *knowing* and *understanding* but also demonstrate their capacity as objective fact-givers. Thereby, the use of different perspectives of the child can be employed to strengthen the professional argument by adding congruence and reaffirming the professional identity (Taylor and White 2000).

Within the data set there appears general recognition by practitioners that to understand a child’s identities, information from significant others should be sought:

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<sup>28</sup> Chapter Eight discusses further the routine omission of ‘*the little things*’.

I think it's important to try and assess children in different environments, and speak to different people involved in that child's life as well. So, you know, rather than just to take the family's account of a child, speak to the school, speak to people, you know, if they are involved in any clubs, or any wider family members. Because, again, that is something that I found with Ruby<sup>29</sup>, was that the school and the family painted a completely different picture, so if you just focus on one area of someone's life then you could be missing some major parts of their identity.  
*Gemma, student social worker.*

You've got an overview from the grandfather, the mother, the grandmother, which wasn't particularly that helpful in some sense. But school was particularly helpful. School gave me a lot of insight into how they [Robbie and Thierry<sup>30</sup>] interacted in school and the, the lack of behavioural difficulties in school and tried to timeline any difficulties in school with what was going on at home... It is just important to have a broader view of the child than to just have Mum's perspective, which was a kind of skewed perspective really, and more about her own difficulties really and about the challenges of bringing up a boy who was, you know, fairly intelligent, quite intelligent, who was strong-willed, who probably had to grow up ahead of his time.  
*Gethin, social worker.*

In the extracts above practitioners highlight the value of having *a broader view of the child* which can be seen as beneficial to not only understanding the child's identities but also in helping practitioners understand what is occurring within the child's home life and the child's response to this. Both these extracts highlight the possibility of people holding dissimilar perspectives about the child. Gemma speaks about how *the school and the family painted a completely different picture* of Ruby whereas Gethin advises that in his opinion Robbie's mother held a *skewed perspective* of him. Here we can observe how the practitioners have employed what Mehan (1990) refers to as 'oracular' reasoning. Oracular reasoning is used to describe how individuals maintain and sustain their positions by 'denying or repelling evidence, which is contrary to or opposes the[ir] beliefs' (Mehan 1990:161). Thereby the reader is encouraged to consider professional views about Ruby *rather than just to take the family's account* and to explicitly consider Robbie's mothers' perspective as *skewed*. As such, through the employment of category entitlement – the idea that 'certain categories of people,

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<sup>29</sup> Ruby, age 15. Core Assessment 11.

<sup>30</sup> Robbie, age 9. Core Assessment 1; Thierry, age 11. Core Assessment 19. Robbie and Thierry are siblings, subject to separate assessments.

in certain contexts, are treated as knowledgeable' (Potter 1996:133) - we can observe that although the views of parents have been sought they are automatically disregarded, as they do not support the views of the practitioners. This legitimacy, or as Moi (1999) explains, the right to speak, may reflect the moral standing of the participants for as Taylor and White (2000:84) note, 'to be believed as a truthful giver of an account is also to be accepted as a morally adequate person'<sup>31</sup>.

Crucially it appears that although practitioners are open to the views of others involved, it is recognised that others may hold conflicting views and the incorporation rather than privileging of any one view is a skilful aspect of the worker's construction of identities in assessment:

I think that it is important to seek, even though you don't necessarily have to think that the views that are given are accurate, you have to include them because they're their perception of the child. Um, I think if a psychologist, or somebody who has assessed a child who has raised specific issues around identity, then I think I would include their views as well. And again, you may not necessarily agree with views but I think, by putting them in your assessment you are allowing people reading the assessments to make a fair, a fair judgement almost aren't you? Because you are not, you're not restricting any information being shared; you are providing it to all.

*Rose, social worker.*

The above extract highlights two interesting aspects of assessing children's identities. Firstly, as the practitioner explains, different people may have different *perceptions* of the child. Thus recognising the multiplicity of the self (as first proposed by James [1890] 1950). Secondly, although views may differ it is not solely the responsibility of the social worker (as above) to make a *fair judgement*. This implies that there is one, essential and true version of the child's identities. It is thus inferred that although there are many ways of knowing another, *judgement* needs to be given as to which version of the child's identities is more valid. As another practitioner explains:

Often, I, we had assessments of children because I, because they have been requested and I, sometimes I see an assessment from a professional and I say 'that it is spot on', it is how I see that child. But sometimes I think 'oh god, that is way off the mark'

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<sup>31</sup> Moral construction in assessments is discussed further in Chapter Ten.

you know? Professionals who come in and only have two sessions with that child and make an opinion and I think well 'how can you really know that child, how can you think that?' You know, they haven't seen that child in that particular setting, they haven't seen that child with their parent, they haven't seen them at the park, at the contact centre... So I think you have to assess how good their opinions are.  
*Olivia, social worker.*

Here the practitioner poses an alternative to the approach proposed above, in that *you have to assess how good their opinions are*. As such, it is suggested that part of the professional role is to 'assess' the validity of another's opinion, in this case an expert witness. Although this does not necessarily imply that the fluidity of identities becomes more fixed, what is implied is that it is the usefulness, or collaborative benefit, of others' opinions that is more valuable to the assessment than how others view the child (see Sheppard 1995a). As Sheppard *et al.* (2001:871) note, whilst some practitioners generate a number of ideas about an individual case and compare these in order to find the best 'fit' with the available evidence, others remain fixed with 'one particular idea about how the situation was to be understood' and sought evidence to support that hypothesis, a phenomenon referred to as 'confirmation bias' (Wolf *et al.* 1985. see also Reder *et al.* 1993). White (1997) also highlights this phenomenon in the way practitioners consider the accounts of parents and carers, suggesting that some accounts, or 'stories' are selectively employed by practitioners as they are more helpful, and hopeful, than others.

As such, there exists contrasting data as to how practitioners utilise the views of others within their assessments. Some practitioners appear more accepting of the fluidity and subjectivity of identities, suggesting that there are many different ways to perceive another, whereas other practitioners prefer more fixed, concrete accounts of how the child *should* be viewed, and seek to achieve professional consensus in respect of the identities of the subject child. This point is significant for it is known that once a child has been categorised practitioners tend to filter all new information about the child and family situation in the light of that categorisation (Farmer and Owen 1995) due to a human tendency to be 'verificationists' (Sheldon 1987).

Lastly in respect to representing the views of others within assessments of children's identities, some practitioners questioned the appropriateness of seeking multiple perspectives:

I try to keep my assessments on identity as holistic as possible, but I suppose it depends on the age of the child, and how intrusive you feel. The threshold of intrusivity on those ones, if you feel that that Core Assessment warrants, you know, in terms of the child. Um, but you can find out quite a lot of that information from parents, relatives and teachers without being too intrusive to the child but some children, older children, might want to give you a lot of that.

*Sioned, assistant team manager.*

I didn't speak to anyone in the Scout group because, whereas I met with the school and the autism team and various groups, but I was told that she loved that [the Scouts] and that was something that she had done herself and so that was an achievement in itself and I didn't feel the need, and you know, maybe I didn't feel it was right to go to the Scouts and ask about her. You know, I was worried that that might make her feel, you know, different there when it was a place for her, where she loved going and was making good progress.

*Alison, student social worker.*

Above the practitioners describe their use of discretion in managing intrusivity within the assessment task. Child and case specificity appear as important aspects in practitioner's decision-making regarding whose views to seek in assessments. It is noted that *some children, older children* might want to participate in the assessment whereas on other occasions children require protection so that they do not feel *different* from their peers. As such, the promotion of the child's best interests has been invoked to override a potentially intrusive trawl of information for the purpose of assessment. The notion of 'intrusivity' within child care social work is contentious. As English *et al.* (2000) note, the actions of Children's Services are commonly perceived as either too intrusive or not intrusive enough, and require careful balancing in relation to the specificity of the case. However, as Cleaver and Walker (2004) observe, the process of being assessed is likely to be experienced by children and their families as traumatic and overly intrusive. As such, it would appear that practitioners' discretion is required, alongside knowledge of the nature of the case and the individuals involved, when considering how intrusive an assessment should be.

It is evident that by examining practitioners' use of information within the assessment process we can grasp something of the artistry that practitioners employ when constructing identities. How practitioners manage this task and ultimately tell *their* story within the assessment document is related to occupational self-image. As Pithouse (1988:24) observes 'the telling of stories confers significance upon the teller and the listener(s) and provides both with a sense of membership and esteem'. As such, it would appear apparent that information that adds weight to the practitioners, as narrators, views of a child's identities will inevitably, and unsurprisingly, be included in the assessment document. Thereby, as with how practitioners conceptualise identities, their approaches to representing identities would also appear diverse, fluid and open to some discretion.

### **Theorising Identities – Using theory in assessment**

Although there appeared diversity in how practitioners chose to deploy the views of others within their assessments, when it came to the use of theory greater cohesion could be observed. As Shuman (1986:195) notes in stories (or accounts) about actual occurrences, the notion of 'tellability' requires an assessment of the narrator's accountability and it is suggested here that some practitioners employ theory in their assessments of children's identities to reaffirm their professional accountability and add the 'taste of a profession' (Bakhtin 1981:293).

From analysing the identity sections within the thirty-two Core Assessment documents in the sample there was a marked use of attachment theory by practitioners to aid their depiction of a child's identities. This may be unsurprising for as Taylor and White (2006: 941) identify 'attachment theory has undergone such revision and fine-tuning that almost any permutation of infant (and indeed adult) behaviour can be explained'. Most sections paid reference, some in clear detail, to the child's attachment to significant others, with few extending the exploration of a child's social interaction to consider relationships outside of the family. From the thirty-two identity sections in the sample, only two<sup>32</sup> sections cited formal theory, both of which drew upon papers on attachment theory. The same practitioner authored the two sections.

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<sup>32</sup> Nathaniel, age 5. Core Assessment 12 and Paulie, age 2. Core Assessment 13.

Research has shown the extent to which practitioners draw on research and theoretical knowledge in practice tends to be low (Rosen 1994; Bergmark and Lundstrom 2002; Rosen 2003), however this does not necessarily imply that practitioners are somehow atheoretical (Fisher 2002; Taylor 2004). Mindful of this I found it essential to consider that practitioners may utilise theory within their construction of identities without necessarily making this explicit within the assessment document. As stated by Sheppard and Ryan (2003:166) ‘while some direct reference to research was rare, it may be that such direct reference underestimates the true frequency of research use’ (see also Benbenishty *et al.* 2003). Further, Sheppard (1995b: 279) noted that practitioners may be drawing on research knowledge as part of an individual or shared ‘practice wisdom’ and as Sue White (2001; see also White and Stancombe 2003) explains, once a theory is integrated into practice wisdom it can be used flexibly by practitioners to bolster their assessments and professional judgements. Therefore within interviews practitioners were asked *in your opinion, is there a theory or model of practice that is most helpful in assessing children’s identities?* I will now discuss their responses.

### **Constructing relational identities: Attachment as a proxy for identity**

As noted above, when practitioners represent the views of significant others about a child’s identities what they actually appear to be recording are accounts about the child’s attachments. This notion of attachment as a proxy for identity also appears within practitioners written assessments about identities. Take, for example, the two following extracts from Core Assessments:

His mother from birth cared for Harry until the [date], with the exception of him being voluntarily placed in foster care between the [dates], where he continued to have daily contact with Ms. Curtis five days per week. During this time Harry developed a significant attachment to his mother. Between the [dates] Harry resided in the care of his maternal grandmother Mrs. Curtis, with whom he also has a strong attachment to. Harry whilst initially being distressed at his mother’s absence, quickly settled and became accustomed to seeing his mother twice weekly for contact sessions. On the [date] when Harry was placed in Local Authority foster care he was visibly upset and distressed at being removed from his grandmother’s care. Whilst Harry has now settled in placement and is happy to return there after both

contact and nursery this is not necessarily indicative of his level of attachment to his mother and maternal grandmother.

*Harry, age 3 years. Core Assessment 24 (combined assessment).*

Since the [date] Emily has resided in Local Authority foster care. Her primary carer is now her foster carer. This will affect Emily's level of attachment to her father. However it is significant that Emily has been able to form healthy attachments in her formative months. Emily is able to recognise Mr. Box, and readily smiles upon seeing him. When distressed Mr. Box comforts Emily appropriately. Emily needs to be raised in an environment that values her individuality, whilst acknowledging that she is a part of a wider familial and societal unit.

*Emily, age 5 months. Core Assessment 5*

Within both these extracts the children's identities are constructed through observation and analysis of their *level of attachment* to primary carers: Harry to his mother, grandmother and foster carer: Emily to her father and foster carer. The similarity is that both children's responses to interaction and separation from caregivers are seen as central to how the child's identities are constructed and what we learn from these extracts is information about the children's attachments and not their identities. As such, we can observe a common-sense understanding of attachment as a proxy for identity. As suggested by Taylor (2004: 226) practitioners 'operate with common-sense notions about relationships, parenting skills and styles, attachment and bonding, and child abuse and neglect that ultimately derive from developmental theory'. Taylor observes that the principles of developmental psychology have 'crossed the boundary between formal expert and informal everyday knowledge' (Taylor 2004:226) making it accessible to both professional and lay people alike. Further, the final sentence in the extract about Emily is paraphrased from the practice guidance and the reader will see this phrase employed in a number of the identity sections in this data set. White *et al.* (2009: 1212) refers to such paraphrasing as a 'tautological shimmer' providing practitioners with a readily available vocabulary about need or concern. As such, one is lead to question the adequacy of some statements to capture a more nuanced and individualised assessment of children's identities.

As within developmental theories of identity development, the quality of the relationship between the infant and their primary care giver is seen as central to the



child's development of identity. The self, or identity, in this pervading discourse of attachment is thus relational (as in Winnicott 1964; Crittenden 2005). As has been observed (White 1996; Burman 2008) concepts of attachment are also used within child care to construct moral versions of parenthood to assess the adequacy of parenting with Bar-On (1999:22) widening this gaze, noting 'every social work theory and every social work intervention approach embodies normative assumptions about what is desirable and good'. This becomes particularly pertinent when, as is the case in this study, the child is constructed from their relationality to adult caregivers. Thereby, knowledge of early care giving experiences appear important to how practitioners construct a child's identities, as one respondent explains:

I think that attachment theory is one of the most relevant theories, not only to identity but to a lot of different things. I think that that is because it can have such a bearing on a child's start to life and then how they are able to then build on that. So whether they have had their needs consistently met will, whether they have been able to form a good attachment to their primary care giver, is going to have an impact on their positive self-esteem, a positive identity.

*Rebecca, social worker.*

Here, and reflecting the views of Taylor (2004), the value of attachment theory *not only to identity but to a lot of different things* is claimed through its usefulness in helping to understand how the past can shape the future – a valuable social work tool indeed. Further, accountability and narrative can also be seen as accomplished through the use of tense. By relating to the past in a way which explains current events, as can be observed above, continuity between present and past is both implied and authorised (Hall 1997). Yet it appears that attachment theory is not used in isolation within practitioners' analyses of children's identities. Concepts from other theories of identity development are also utilised by workers within their accounts on children's identities. Before I turn to discuss these sources I will briefly outline my use of the term 'concept'. The use of a 'concept', as explained by Taylor and White (2006:889):

May be indicative or representative of theoretical beliefs held. Individuals may offer conceptual understandings of something that is not necessarily accompanied by other concepts contained within a theory. For example, a practitioner may cite the concept of 'modelling' but not discuss any other principles contained within social learning theory. They may or may not

have a comprehensive understanding of the theory from which the concept is derived.

Payne (2000:332-3) observes that social work theories are ‘often used eclectically, in combination’ and by drawing on concepts to make sense of the task at hand, practitioners disaggregate the presenting issue, borrowing from different theoretical perspectives to explain different aspects of the client’s life that are deemed to be problematic. For example, in the following extract from an identity section I highlight (in italics) what appear to be different concepts being utilised:

Despite the significant disruption Tilly has experienced regarding her primary carers (*attachment theory*), she has a well-developed sense of family identity (*socio-genealogical connectedness*). She locates herself firmly in the Smith family, knowing that she is a daughter, sister and granddaughter (*identity theory*). She appears to accept that she lives with her grandparents and yet sees her parents and brothers every day and regularly has tea with them or goes out for trips, such as to the circus with them (*systems theory*).

Tilly, age 5. Core Assessment 14.

By employing his/her professional knowledge in such a manner, the practitioner is thus artfully utilising concepts from theoretical, formal knowledge (Eraut 1994). Thereby, the practitioner can be seen as constructing the case (knowledge, action, resolution) via a tacit process of knowledge selection. In this way, then, the practitioner becomes both the active constructor of the case, but also of his or her own knowledge base (see Payne 2005). Below I discuss further the selective use of concepts by practitioners and focus on two specific examples: the concept of coherence and the concept of role modelling.

### **Socio-genealogical connectedness – *the concept of coherence***

In 2006 Aldgate *et al.*’s edited text ‘*The Developing World of the Child*’ was published as a resource material to support the *Every Child Matters* policy initiative in England. This collection introduced to practitioners Owusu-Bempah’s proposal of the use of socio-genealogical connectedness in understanding and promoting a child’s sense of identity<sup>33</sup>. Utilising Bowlby’s (1969) ideas on attachment, separation and

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<sup>33</sup> Writings about socio-genealogical connectedness had previously focused on the utilisation of the theory in understanding attachments and loss (see, for example, Owusu-Bempah and Howitt 1997).

loss, and reflecting Fahlberg's (1988) work with children placed outside of their families, the notion of socio-genealogical connectedness refers to:

[T]he extent to which children integrate into their inner world their birth parents' biological and social backgrounds; the extent to which a child sees her or himself as an offshoot of his or her parents' backgrounds, biologically as well as socially. (Owusu-Bempah 2006:114).

As Giddens has argued, identity is 'a reflexively organised endeavour...which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continually revised biographical narratives' through the complexities of modern social life (1991:5). Thus, a child's need to hold knowledge of their parental and familial past, affording them a sense of coherence, is seen as key to the development of a healthy sense of identity (see also Lifton 1994) and it is this notion of coherence that appeared within a sub-section of the data set. Six of the thirty-two identity sections in the sample make reference to the child's perceived need for a coherent life story to help them make sense of themselves and their world. For example:

In relation to Nancy's identity and sense of location as a family member, it is highly likely that she lacks a *sense of coherence* (my emphasis) about her family, as there are many step relatives and half siblings who have come in and out of her life and she herself has experienced many moves. She now needs help and assistance from a strong, loving adult who is able to be open and honest about the events and relationships in Nancy's life and therefore enable her to make some sense of her past and of her family. To some extent, a sense of coherence regarding her paternal family is already likely to be developing, as Nancy does now seem to have a clear sense of belonging to her large extended paternal family [with whom she is placed]. However, much work needs to be done with her to help her form coherence about her life. *Nancy, age 11. Core Assessment 8 (combined assessment)*

Paulie is being brought up by both his birth parents, which facilitates the development of a strong sense of identity regarding his parentage, his extended family, his family origins, his ethnicity and his racial origins. To ensure that this happens and that Paulie develops a strong sense of identity and location within his family and a secure sense of self, attachment theory emphasises that caregivers should provide children with stability, security and predictability (i.e. a *secure base*). A positive care giving environment will also ensure the child has *coherent, honest accounts of his/her life, such as explanations and dialogue* (my emphasis) about difficult aspects of family history,

about half/step siblings and extended family members (Daniel, et al 2005).

*Paulie, age 2. Core Assessment 13.*

Both these examples emphasise the importance of coherence through the practitioner's explanations that in order to enable children to develop *a strong sense of identity and location* within his/her family, children require *a sense of coherence*. Here the idea of coherence is employed to emphasise the parent and carers' capacity, and moral duty, to provide the children with this information. For example, it is suggested in Paulie's extract that *attachment theory emphasises that caregivers should provide children with stability, security and predictability* and that *a positive care giving environment will also ensure the child has coherent, honest accounts of his/her life*. Thereby the practitioner is making her assessment accountable by employing concepts from both attachment theory and the theory of socio-genealogical connectedness. In contrast the assessment of Nancy's identities displays thinly disguised criticisms of the *many step relatives and half siblings who have come in and out of her life* juxtaposing this against her need for a *strong, loving adult who is able to be open and honest*. As such, the use of the concept of coherence in these instances, appear to focus on the adults in the children's lives and not the children themselves. This would appear to reflect Holland's (2000) observation that social work assessments tend to focus on parents as adults rather than on the children as subjects.

As the reader will note, Paulie's identity section combines the concept of coherence with the principles of attachment theory, demonstrating the practitioner's professional competence in decompartmentalising the issues and drawing on relevant literature (e.g. Daniel *et al.* 2005) to invoke concepts to support his/her assessment. Further, as can be observed in the extracts above and below, the practitioner reports *a child needs a secure base*, suggesting (as in White 1998:283) that the concept of a secure base has come to be 'seen as one of the child's most basic needs'. Thereby we can note sophisticated use of concepts within some practitioner assessments, as the practitioner explained during interview:

Well theoretically if you look at attachment theory as an almost over-arching theory which feeds into, well not feeds into but concepts within it, a child needs a secure base um, and we expect

that, don't we? And to have that secure base they have to have some kind of idea of a narrative of their life and that's socio-genealogical connectedness and all the research on that by Owusu-Bempah. It's fantastic, really interesting and if it's separate, I agree with him that it's a separate theory, but it's almost a concept within the secure base that feeds into that. Because I don't see how any child can be secure in foster care without having, having made some sort of sense about their past and why they are there. And if they don't feel secure, how are they going to be positively exploratory and all the things that are covered in that secure base and develop their identity?

*Sioned, assistant team manager.*

As such, it may be that some practitioners are acutely aware of their use of formal concepts within their written work and everyday practice and are skilled in their use. However, as I demonstrate below, it appears that other practitioners are less attuned to their application of any formal theory or related concepts.

### **Social Learning Theory – *the concept of role modelling***

As discussed in Chapter Three, social learning theory argues that people learn from one another via such explanatory concepts as observational learning, imitation, and modelling. Following the general principles of social learning theory individuals learn by observing the behaviour of others (the model) and the outcomes of those behaviours (Ormrod 1999). Four of the thirty-two identity sections in the sample paid reference to the lack of a *role model* within the child's life. Interestingly, these references all discussed boys. For example<sup>34</sup>:

Within his nuclear family context, Thierry presents as a child who feels he needs to take charge and control, as he recognises that he is the oldest of three siblings and that his mother often presents as a child herself in terms of her vulnerability. He appears to be very confused and angry about this position within his family, as he is either the man of the house or a child having *no male role model* and the need to crave attention from his mother.

*Thierry, age 11. Core Assessment 19. Emphasis added.*

Chester identifies more strongly with Billie's [half-sibling] father in the paternal role, because he has been involved in Chester's life since he was a young baby. However, he has failed to maintain consistent contact with Chester and this is likely to have

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<sup>34</sup> Also see Dominic's identity section on page 115.

an impact on Chester's self-esteem as he is likely to feel rejected by the inconsistent contact with Mr Stevens and *lack a of positive male/father role model*.

*Chester, age 4. Core Assessment 26 (combined assessment). Emphasis added.*

Within these examples the lack of a male role model, and the child's responses to this is proposed as an explanation of the child's behaviour and self-perception. However, it is the lack of a role model, and not the influence of existing models that the practitioners focus upon. As such the practitioners' artistry in employing theoretical concepts to bolster their assessments can be observed through their deployment of the principles of modelling but crafting these ideas to meet the desired documentary need. This may reflect that, similar to attachment theory, social learning theory in practice has undergone 'revision and fine-tuning' (Taylor and White 2006:941) making it distinct from the principles of pure social learning theory. Further, it is of note that no practitioner explicitly identified their use of social learning theory within their constructions of identities, possibly suggesting that they were aware of the concept of modelling but unable to locate this within a theoretical framework (as in Rosen 1994).

### **Practitioners use of theory as 'fact'**

In her analysis of social works knowledge base Trevithick (2008:1233) distinguished three forms of knowledge: 'theoretical knowledge (or theory), factual knowledge (including research) and practice knowledge (including practice/practical/personal knowledge and experience)'. Thereby making a distinction between theory and 'fact'. Trevithick (2008:1216) did, however, note that these different forms of knowledge should be viewed as intertwined, complimentary to each other rather than being seen in conflict with one another. Further, as Taylor and White (2006) suggest, the use of 'facts' needs to be underpinned by theory and theory needs to be underpinned by 'facts', with both needing to be utilised alongside direct practice to ensure that practice is knowledge-based. As such, it would appear that the relationship between theory and 'fact' is a marked one. It is my assertion that within this study practitioners appear to utilise theory as 'fact' to bolster their assessments and to reaffirm their professional identity.

Taylor (2008b) used documents to study the process through which the recorded texts reach the status of factual account. According to Taylor, factual information would appear to exclude the writer's personal interpretive narratives that are related to the situation – 'facts' become standalone features of the account. Above I have illustrated how practitioners both explicitly and implicitly invoke theoretical concepts within their assessments of children's identities. The use of these concepts in the assessments appears unquestioned, creating a 'professional lens' through which to understand the conditions presented (Bakhtin 1981). As such, it is my assertion that practitioners employ theory as 'fact' within their constructions of children's identities as a persuasive rhetorical device, attempting to reaffirm their professional identity by constructing assessments that describe and report on how things *really are* (Juhila 1995).

## Summary

As indicated above, the assessment of children's identities is an intricate, iterative task that poses practitioners with considerable practical challenges to their management of a case. Practitioners appear to utilise artistry in their management of the assessment task, and through the above examples of sourcing information and their selective invocation of elements of formal theory, I have attempted to make explicit something of the flexible art of constructing the identity section within a Core Assessment by delineating some of the everyday resources and components that lend authority to the worker as the narrator of the child's identities.

The complexity and multi-faceted nature of identities appears to be acknowledged by most practitioners and some go to great lengths to collate a plethora of information to ensure that they can account for the multiplicity of identities that a child may occupy. It appears that in order to collate information pertinent to a child's identities the practitioner's preference is, unsurprisingly, to rely upon information directly gained from the child, parent and carer with such information best gleaned by use of flexibility and informality. This process appears as iterative and cumulative, with practitioners wishing to, as one said, *get into the real environment* of the child: that is seeking information as to the intimate and everyday details of lives of children upon which to build their constructions of identities. How practitioners manage this task is seen by them as less important than *knowing* the child. The narrative construction of

the identity sections enables practitioners to tell *their* story of the child, providing the reader with implicit suggestions of what *should* be considered as ‘fact’. In presenting information as ‘fact’ practitioners employ the rhetorical devices of bringing in witnesses, reporting speech, category entitlement, narrativity and coherence to add weight to their assessments. Further, practitioners appear to employ theory within the identity sections not simply to aid an understanding of the children’s identities but also to add the ‘taste of a profession’ (Bakhtin 1981:293). Thereby ownership of the assessment remains very much in the hands of the practitioner. As such, the identity sections appear to be the practitioner’s account of how the identities of the subject child *should* be viewed, revealing a notion that there is some singular, authentic identity to be captured and encoded in assessment.

The following chapter will now consider in more detail the content of the thirty-two identity sections. The chapter will show how official records, such as the assessment documents, are more likely to obfuscate than reveal the complex way assessment work in terms of identity is routinely accomplished, bringing to light how the Core Assessments generate greater uniformity in what constitutes identity in assessment practice than one may expect.



## **Chapter Seven**

### **The routinisation of identities as an assessment task**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter introduced the practitioners and the routine processes they undertake when assessing children's identities. It was suggested that the assessment of identities is a creative, artful and complex task in which practitioners seek to unearth the intimate and mundane details of the child's life. In this chapter we consider how social work policy and procedures, in this instance the operationalisation of the Assessment Framework, has acted to create assessments of children's identities that are standardised and routinised. In a possible attempt to overcome the challenges encountered when assessing a dynamic concept such as 'identity', the Core Assessment documents routinely present identity in terms the child's familial relationships and an appraisal of the child's self-esteem. However this approach to identity may come at a price, in that by pursuing ideas of the child within the family, as promoted by developmental theories, practitioners run the risk of neglecting the child's agency in forming both familial relationships and identities of their own. Further, the inclusion of self-esteem as a topic by which to grasp identity, as we shall observe, does little to assist practitioners in making sense of the task at hand.

#### **Practitioners' use of practice guidance in assessments of children's identities**

The central research questions in this investigation address how social work practitioners conceptualise children's identities and how this knowledge is utilised in the construction of children's identities within the assessment process. As the previous chapter demonstrates, before social workers assess identities they necessarily draw upon some form of conceptual resource from which to constitute identity in childhood. In exploring their conceptual fields further, additional data from the Core Assessment sample and from social worker interview accounts are drawn upon to reveal practitioners' knowledge sources and assumptions about what represents children's identities.

We start with the dimensions within the Assessment Framework and the practice guidance that has been published to assist practitioners. This advises that an assessment of a child's identities:

Concerns the child's growing sense of self as a separate and valued person. Includes the child's view of self and abilities, self image and self esteem, and having a positive sense of individuality. Race, religion, age, gender, sexuality and disability may all contribute to this. Feelings of belonging and acceptance by family, peer group and wider society, including other cultural groups.

(National Assembly for Wales 2001b: 19)<sup>35</sup>

We can note from the practice guidance that identity is represented as a multi-faceted area of assessment, covering a number of aspects of social and personal integration and it is the extent to which practitioners utilise this guidance that is of concern here. The practice guidance, like the Assessment Framework itself, is instructive rather than prescriptive; Horwath (2002) found that practitioners frequently undertake assessments without making reference to the practice guidance. However, in this study practitioners' selective use of the practice guidance to frame their assessments of children's identities can be observed.

Five of the thirty-two (15.6%) Core Assessments described explicitly what the practitioners considered children's identities to be, with specific areas of assessed need made prominent by the practitioners. For example, consider the two following extracts from the children's identity sections:

Paulie is being brought up by both his birth parents, which facilitates the development of a strong sense of identity regarding his parentage, his extended family, his family origins, his ethnicity and his racial origins.

*Paulie: age 2 years. Assessment 13*

Identity is, in my opinion, a particular area of need, which should be supported and monitored closely. *A positive sense* of identity will need consideration to be given to his *age, gender, sexuality and any disability*.

*Steveo: age 10 years. Assessment 15. Emphasis added.*

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<sup>35</sup> This definition of 'identity' is replicated within the *Working Together* document (Welsh Assembly Government 2007).

Within these two brief expositions of identity the practitioners have applied their common sense understanding of identity, positioning their grasp of identities to include characteristics such as *parentage, his extended family, his family origins, his ethnicity and his racial origins* and *age, gender, sexuality and any disability*. As Pithouse (1988:125) explains:

[C]ommon-sense theory is drawn partly from the formal occupational knowledge base but it also contains the accumulated experience and wisdom of working in the setting itself. Other important tributaries of daily knowledge stem from the worker's membership of a wider community than the colleague group. Indeed it is the case that members of all professions will reflect to some degree the views of the wider laity in relation to their occupational talk.

As such, the above extracts can be seen to employ common-sense understandings of identity, to include ideas that can be located both in professional and lay knowledges. However closer inspection reveals the 'tautological shimmer' (White *et al.* 2009: 1212) with the second worker's account appearing to paraphrase the practice guidance (see italics). The former account demonstrates a greater application of the practitioner's own approach to identities and specific areas of identity that s/he deems relevant to Paulie. However, such approaches were in a minority and more commonly practitioners constructed their assessments in a more standardised fashion, employing terminology from the practice guidance to build or bolster their assessments:

Leon, like any other child needs to know his place within the family and to be a *valued* member of it. In order to develop a strong sense of identity, he needs consistency of care from at least one primary care giver who will provide him with consistent and supportive parenting.

*Leon: age 9 years. Assessment 20. Emphasis added.*

I do not feel that J-J has a positive sense of identity within the family. He needs to develop and see himself *as a separate and valued person*.

*J-J: age 11 years. Assessment 16. Emphasis added.*

Summary of Child's needs as they represent the Parenting Task Sought: *This concerns Tamsin's growing sense of self as a separate and valued person. This includes her view of self and her abilities, her self image and self esteem and having a positive sense of her individuality, feelings of belonging and acceptance*

*by family, peers and the wider community.*

*Tamsin: age 10 months. Assessment 32. Emphasis added.*

In the above extracts I highlight (in italics) terminology that would seem to be transposed from the guidance. The reader may note the summary of Tasmin's needs is a verbatim representation of the practice guidance. However notably, there is no application (as exists within the other examples) of how these needs specifically relate to Tamsin. Rather it would appear that the practitioner has employed the practice guidance as a source of easy words: the 'tautological shimmer' (White *et al* 2009: 1212). As such, the account of Tamsin's identities provides us with an artificial representation of the needs of 'the standardised child' (White 1998: 269) rather than an account of her unique identities. Holland (2004) described similar practices in her investigation into the social work assessment processes with descriptions of a baby being copied directly from developmental charts. These examples suggest that some practitioners rely upon the practice guidance in their constructions of children's identities, resulting in standardised rather than individualised accounts of the child.

As highlighted previously (Chapter One) the social work Core Assessment is a process of categorisation (see for example, Hall and Slembrouck 2009), in which a child's individual needs are considered alongside the other assessment domains of 'Parenting Capacity' and 'Family and Environmental Factors'. Thereby, one could reasonably expect that the identity section may be the one part of the assessment in which practitioners seize the opportunity to grasp the individuality of the child. However as Philp (1979:91) observes, the purpose of social work activity is paradoxical in that firstly, social work is interested to identify individuals in society in need of professional intervention and secondly, to categorise these individuals in order to ascertain how best to help them. As such he suggested 'the social worker creates a subject who is characterised by universal subjectivity, one which applies to all individuals and yet to no one in particular'. Thus, it is possible that the assessment task restricts nuance and creativity in practitioners' assessments and encourages routinised and standardised accounts of children's identities.

To explore this point I asked practitioners to provide an account of an assessment of a child's identities that they considered to be of a 'good standard'. Practitioners

appeared to find this question more difficult to answer than I had anticipated and the data collated from this enquiry did not include the rich, colourful insights into children's lives that I anticipated. Rather it appeared that practitioners remained cautious in their descriptions of children with many simply orientating the themes contained within the assessment document. This I found surprising for as Pithouse (1988:54) observes: 'the minutiae of specific and intimate knowledge held by workers about their many cases can never be fully encoded in organisational records' and I had anticipated hearing practitioners' 'specific and intimate knowledge' within the semi-structured interview environment. Listening to their constrained and routinised descriptions of the children in relation to this Core Assessment category, called into question their sense of confidence in tackling the complex nature of identity:

I mean off the top of my head, Megan's<sup>36</sup>. When I think of what I wrote, and I probably didn't write a vast amount, um but I think that, the feedback that I had from the assessment that I did on Megan, and I think possibly her brother, you know people did say that the child, that there, it came across in the assessment what the children were like and I think if you can do that, that's probably what, you know, what you are expected to do really, isn't it? But no, you know, the more you ask me about it the more I think, you know, how I would do it again? And how different children and what sort of work I would do with them to try and make sure that I was covering it as in-depth, and probably as accurate, as I could.  
*Rose, social worker.*

In this example it is apparent that although the practitioner had received positive feedback regarding her assessment of Megan's identities, she remained uncertain as to whether she had covered the subject *in-depth* and *as accurate* as she could<sup>37</sup>. Here the practitioner appeared concerned to avoid a surface level assessment of Megan's identities (see Howe 1996) so that *it came across in the assessment what the children were like*. This theme arose in many interviews: that practitioners lacked confidence in their ability to assess identities. However, at this point, one must ask is an *in-depth* and *accurate* assessment of a child's identities achievable? A key concept here, although not one highlighted by practitioners in interview, is that of time<sup>38</sup>. As can be

<sup>36</sup> Megan, age 8 months. Core Assessment 24 (combined assessment).

<sup>37</sup> Chapter Ten explores the views of Megan's carers highlighting discrepancies in how parents/carers appraise assessments of children's identities compared to the appraisal of the practitioner.

<sup>38</sup> How parents and carers appear to equate the time practitioners spend with children to how well practitioners 'get to know' children is discussed in Chapter Nine.

observed from the table contained in Appendix 3, on average the assessments in this data set took twelve working weeks to complete, surpassing the seven working weeks suggested within the Framework (National Assembly for Wales 2001a: 46, 3.11). This means that the practitioners in this study all had a longer period of time than is recommended to learn about and assess the children's identities. However it would be unrealistic to believe that practitioners spent the twelve weeks of the assessment duration working exclusively on the assessment. Rather it would appear that practitioners struggle to complete assessments within the allocated timescales and this, unsurprisingly, can result in assessments that are rushed. As Ferguson (2004:208) notes, the temporal structure of protecting children, results in practice where practitioners must engage with children on 'a fleeting, transient basis, severely limiting what can be known about them'. As such, it would appear that practitioner uncertainty in the task of assessing children's identities may be well founded, for as the Victoria Climbié (Laming 2003) and Baby Peter (Haringey Local Safeguarding Children Board 2009; Care Quality Commission 2009) inquiries have shown *seeing* a child does not equate with *knowing* a child or *knowing* about their circumstances.

### **Hidden complexity: Identity as a fluid and malleable concept**

Practitioners' lack of confidence in their ability to assess identities is a theme worthy of further consideration, for if a practitioner is not entirely certain of what it is they are assessing the very task of undertaking the assessment becomes problematic. Thus I deemed it possible that this lack of confidence could stem from limited awareness of what constitutes identities *per se*. Therefore I asked practitioners to describe for me their own identities: both as children and as adults. Most practitioners were able to respond to this task, providing detailed and insightful descriptions of what they perceived their identities to be. Categories in childhood, such as family composition, relationships, class, nationality, religion, were commonplace in these accounts with childhood identities constructed differently to their self-appraisals of their adult identities:

Um, social worker, mother of two, Irish, married, um, live in Wales, um female, um feminist. Um, I think that's about it really. I think that just about covers it, how I see it, how I see myself at the minute but it'll probably change...if you'd of asked me this 10 years ago... *Well that leads us on nicely to the second question: do you think this assessment would be different if you were a child?* Yeah, it would be things like, um, Duran Duran

fan, netballer, oh um going out with um, whatever boy it was at the time, whatever gang I was in, who my friends were, um, where I hung out, drinker not drinker, smoker, smoker would have been one, um. Yeah all sorts of things that would have been really important to me then which are not important to me now as I've grown up into a different stage.... I mean I hadn't actually realised that my self but, yeah, definitely looking back to how I would describe myself as a child, and how I would describe myself now, those other things are not important now, things that are on the periphery of life. So that you wouldn't think that your friends were a big part of your identity but when you are a kid they are important to you, who you're seen with, who you're not seen with, or what you do in your spare time down to even if you wouldn't speak to someone if they didn't smoke or if they didn't like the same band as you, but you grow up and it's a bit sad isn't it?

*Lola, social worker.*

The data from the practitioners' self-reporting of their own identities is rich in this sort of personal detail and revealed their unique biographies linked by most to a sense of flux in relation to domestic and environmental influences that shaped their sense of self (as in Kidd 2002; Aron 2003). As Lola states *I think that just about covers... how I see myself at the minute but it'll probably change...if you'd of asked me this 10 years ago*. Thus practitioners tend to view their identities as dynamic and fluid, evolving from childhood into adulthood (see McAdams 1993). As within many of the theories of identity discussed in Chapter Three, practitioners tended to view identity as a malleable concept, receptive to outside influences:

I think it [identity] changes; it's not um, something that's static. It's something that changes, depending on environment. I think people might have different identities according to their social situation. I'd imagine I'm a different person in work than I am at home, but I could say that I've got a professional identity and a personal identity, so I think it might be something that might change.

*Gemma, student social worker.*

I do think identity changes with age because I think identity, increasingly, and this is a personal view, OK? I think that identity is increasingly influenced by, um, by factors totally outside of our considerations like, popular culture, stuff like that. I've think they've got increasingly, increasingly significant in terms of children's identities.

*Christian, senior social work practitioner.*

Here we can note practitioners' views that *social situations* and *popular culture* inform and shape identity in ways that are fluid and malleable. This notion is well documented within the theoretical discussions contained within Chapter Three (see for example, Erikson 1963, 1968; Stryker 1987). However, more pertinent for this discussion is the suggestion that practitioners are aware of the dynamic nature of identities and this poses specific challenges for how social workers undertake the task of assessing identities. For example, we can see that in undertaking the assessment task some practitioners are able to distinguish between areas of identity that are seen as more subtle and transient than others:

I think that um, I don't think that identity is static, no. Um, I think that the fact that I am Welsh is always going to be, its always going to be the same but I think that in the fact of being Welsh, if you asked me whether I was say, Welsh or Scottish when I was say, five, I might have been able to tell you that I was Welsh, or maybe older, but you know, through younger childhood I would have said 'yeah, I'm Welsh'. How much that meant to me at a young age differs very much to how it is now. It's more significant for me now so it's a static feature in that it hasn't changed but my feelings about it have changed. So I don't think identity is static. I think it is quite a changing thing. And interpretation of identity, yeah, there will be factors of identity that remain the same but your own interpretation, and that of other people's, changes.

*Rose, social worker.*

I think J-J's<sup>39</sup> identity could change and he can develop confidence, and a greater sense of self awareness but I also think that his insecurities will always be there at the back somewhere 'cos they have been instilled at such a young age. And so that's very hard to shake off. I think there is a lot, your core identity, which may have been formed when you were younger, that is always there.

*Alison, student social worker.*

The notion that one's identity is multi-faceted, the composite of a number of different elements, as in Stryker and Serpe (1982) and of course in the practice guidance, appears influential in how practitioners construct children's identities. Above, practitioners have mooted that some areas of an individual's identities, such as in the examples above, nationality and deep-rooted aspects of personality may be more rigid than others, such as levels of confidence and self-awareness. Many writers challenge

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<sup>39</sup> J-J, age 11. Core Assessment 16.



this notion of rigidity in identities (see for example Parham [1989] and Carter [1995] on the fluidity of cultural and racial identities). Rose demonstrates her understanding of the fluidity of identities by suggesting that some aspects of identity are open to *interpretation*: the *factors of identity* may remain fixed, e.g., *I am Welsh*, however how being Welsh impacts upon one's identities is open to *your own interpretation, and that of other people's*. Thus through engaging with practitioners in exploring identity we can observe how workers employ and to some extent share a common-sense theory of the subjective nature of identities albeit implicitly and perhaps unrecognised by the practitioners<sup>40</sup>.

The accounts of the practitioners' own identities suggest, perhaps predictably, that they had a greater facility for assessing their own identities than those of the subject children. Practitioners' depictions of their own identities were generally comprehensive and colourful in contrast to the prescribed and bounded accounts of children's identities that were often presented in the completed Core Assessments. However, this was not always the case. One practitioner vocalised her difficulties in describing her own identities:

Gosh (laughs) to be honest, I've read and re-read that one [question] and I haven't got the faintest idea! I, well the only thing I can think of is Welsh. Um, (laughs) it's just not something that I've ever thought about!  
*Frances, social worker.*

Frances' struggle to describe her own identity highlights an important point: how often, if at all, do we consciously take the time to think about our identities? This is a pertinent point in how social workers construct identities *for* children, as practitioners are being asked to undertake a task that is uncommon, beyond the mundane, and a task that can have considerable repercussions for the children if not undertaken sensitively. It appears that some practitioners are uncertain as to what to include in their assessments of children's identities and this may explain why some practitioners appear to rely on the formal terms and phrases in the guidance when constructing children's identities. However, and as highlighted by Rose above, several practitioners were reflexively aware of the complexities that assessing a child's

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<sup>40</sup> Practitioners' utilisation of 'theory' to bolster their assessments of children's identities is discussed more fully in Chapter Six.

identities entails, which raised doubts for some as to their sense of competence in this area. It is to how practitioners manage this complexity that the enquiry now turns.

### **Identity as a discrete assessment domain**

Many practitioners referred to the complexities of capturing identity within the assessment process:

I find assessing identity one of the hardest things to do, and I think that it is difficult to isolate it from other areas of the assessment. It's all very much entangled, and I think that, perhaps, that doesn't help when you are doing assessments of identity that, you know, you have to sort of pick it out in bits, and I just find it a very difficult area.

*Frances, social worker.*

I think that I often find in my assessments that I often don't say as much in my identity sections because I say it in my family and relationships sections and I think that may be the problem in that I don't relate it enough to the child's identity. But I might, in the family and social relationships section I would talk about their relationship with their Mum, I would talk about their relationship with their Dad, you know, whether they see their Dad, who they think their Dad is, siblings relationships, external family, and things like that, without perhaps, relating that to identity within the identity section.

*Rebecca, social worker.*

Practitioners frequently remarked, in interview, that identity was a problematic assessment domain. As Frances noted, *I find assessing identity one of the hardest things to do* suggesting that the conceptual closeness of identity to other assessment domains creates a sense that the concept is *entangled* and difficult to *isolate...from other areas of the assessment*. Thereby it would appear that identity as an assessment task may become obscured by its multifaceted nature. As Rebecca, above, explained *I often don't say as much in my identity sections because I say it in my family and relationships sections* suggesting that the conceptual closeness of identity to other assessment domains can result in practitioners struggling to decide what to include in the identity section. Here the practitioners employ a sense of cohesion, referring to the ways identity as an assessment domain is linked to other domains, thereby the identity section becomes understandable in relations to previous sections (as in Hall 1997). This notion of cohesion – that identity is enmeshed within a number of the other assessment domains – poses difficulties for practitioners' management of the

assessment task. Further, as noted above, the practitioners appear to construct identity as a fluid and malleable concept but with some aspects of identity being considered as more fixed than others. The notion of perceived malleability within children's identities is discussed in the following chapter; the remainder of this chapter now considers in more detail the construction of identities within the assessment documents.

### **The routinisation of children's identities within assessments**

Aas (2004) recognised the phenomenon of standardisation when considering the use of databases in penal systems and is of use here to explain how standardised systems of recording are employed not to construct identities as unique but rather as a means to assist categorisation. With the use of databases, or in the context of this study the Assessment Framework, it is claimed:

Identity is not marked by its unique biography and a certain internal development, but is rather adjusted to the 'computer's ontology': composed of items of information that like Lego bricks can be taken apart and clearly understood as well as fit with other items of information in new configurations. To achieve this compatibility, the meaning of words used to describe identity needs to be standardised and de-contextualised in order to fit into the parameters presented by the database.  
(Aas, 2004: 386).

As such, practitioners are required to produce dispersed and fragmented identities for clients consisting of a series of characteristics and pieces of information, which are easy to (re)present and compare. Through this process, the individuality of the subject child is in danger of disappearing and we are left with a selection of surface-level information that provides little scope for in-depth explanation, analysis or understanding (Parton 2008). This opens the possibility for children's individual identities to become standardised with their individuality often made secondary to their status as children (as in James 1993). Such deconstruction of identity can be seen to occur within the setting and the records explored in this study, with identity coming to consist of the composite of two aspects of children's lives: familial relationships and a child's level of self-esteem.

### **Proxies for the interpretation of identities**

The previous chapter introduced the notion of attachment as proxy to identity, suggesting that the common-sense interpretation of identities through the assessment of attachments appears unquestioned. This notion appeared in spoken and written accounts of children's identities, however closer examination of the Core Assessment sample in this thesis suggests other proxies for identities. In crafting written assessments of 'identity' it appears that practitioners may have developed a shared informal understanding about this dimension, conflating identity with the child's familial relationships (in which attachment is routinely implicated) and sense of self-esteem. We now explore this practical strategy in more detail.

### **Familial identities as proxies to individual identities**

Kagan (1998) identified three main ways in which parents influence their child's psychological development: direct interaction, identification and the transmission of family stories. Within the data set of thirty-two assessments, all with the exception of one<sup>41</sup> referred to children's relationships with their families within the 'identity' section. This suggests that practitioners are likely to invoke the role that families play in shaping a child's identities. As one practitioner explains:

I suppose if you look at it from birth, your family and their role in socialising you helps form the basis of your identity. So their interactions with you help you to develop into what you are.  
*Gemma, social work student.*

As recognised by Kagan (1998) the impact of early socialisation and the influence of the domestic environment, particularly parenting, upon our identities is well documented (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980; Erikson 1963, 1968. See Chapter Three). Further, as noted by Ferguson (2004: 116) the contemporary interagency model of safeguarding children 'leaves social workers with an increasingly important role in engaging with parents through home visits and the gathering of 'social evidence''. Thereby in light of this and the time restrictions placed on practitioners, it is perhaps unsurprising that practitioners use their knowledge of a child's family in their constructions of children's identities, as the following extracts explain:

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<sup>41</sup> Charlie, age 14 years. Core Assessment 28. Discussed below.

I think it is very important for children to be able to identify who family are, and where they fit within it, in order for them to be able to develop a clear sense of who they are, and I've noticed a lot, in other cases, if those are vague, children are very confused about whose who in the family. It impacts upon their perception of where they belong, and their self-esteem. So yeah, I think it's key.

*Frances, social worker.*

I think definitely because your parents, your family, contribute to your identity because *they are the ones who do, or don't give you, or help to give you a positive sense of your own identity...* And obviously you get, you get a lot of the physical parts of your identity from your parents, so your skin colour, your hair colour, your eye colour, your, perhaps, your religion, the area in which you live, your location within your family, whether you are the oldest sibling, the youngest sibling, the sibling in the middle, you know, where you have got half-siblings, have you got the same father as your brothers and sister, you know, do you live with your brothers and sisters? Do you live with your Dad? Do you see your Dad, if he is not around? Are you part of a large extended family? You know, so are aunts and uncles and grandparents important? And that would all contribute to your identity as well.

*Rebecca, social worker.* Emphasis added.

The role that the family plays in shaping a child's identities is deemed by workers to be of great importance and, as noted earlier, developmental theories make this association explicit. Yet whilst demonstrating knowledge of developmental concepts, by focusing on the role of families in shaping children's identities practitioners run the risk of overlooking the child's capacity for social agency. As in Kagan's (1998) recognition of the relevances of identification, so Rebecca (above) rightly acknowledges many children *get a lot of the physical parts of [their] identity from [their] parents*. Yet, such statements implicitly cast the child as receptive, passive beings and the child's agency to achieve or choose identities of their own may in consequence be overlooked (James, Jenks and Prout 1998). Further, consider Tommy's identity section below, produced here in full:

Jessica [mother] stated that Daniel is the father of her baby [Tommy] and they intend to bring the child up together. Initially Jessica stated that she intended to live alone with Tommy in her flat and Daniel would remain in his flat in a nearby town. However they decided to live together [date] in Jessica's flat. Both stated that this decision was made due to advice from Daniel's legal advisor. Both considered that they would have a

better chance of getting care of Tommy if they lived at the same address.

*Tommy, age 6 months. Core Assessment 3.*

Within this identity section Tommy is described solely in terms of his parents' relationship and their living arrangements. It is difficult to ascertain what this identity section actually tells us about Tommy, and it is of note that the section commences by referring to Tommy as his mother's *baby* rather than referring to him as an individual in his own right. Reminiscent of Winnicott's ([circa. 1940] 1960: 39) famous dictum 'there is no such thing as an infant', meaning that there are no babies unrelated to mothers, Tommy's identity section would seem to provide an example of a child's identities being constructed solely through the lens of his familial relationships. As such, Tommy seems constructed more as an object rather than a person (Burman 2008. see also Holland 2001, 2004). Thus, by focusing on the family, there exists potential for the child and their identities to be considered solely as the product of the family, an object upon which identities are bestowed rather active participants in the constructions of their own identities.

The majority of assessments considered children's relationships with their family members as a central part of the identity section with little differentiation between whether maternal or paternal family were discussed. Six (18.75%) of the subject children within the data set had parents who remained together, suggesting that even when parents separate, practitioners consider the child's relationships with both sides of the family as significant to the child's identities. This may reflect Speak *et al.*'s (1997) suggestion that the role of non-resident fathers has been redefined from financial provider to being an emotionally supportive resource for their children. As such, there may be indications of a move away from the 'men as no use' discourse identified by Scourfield (2002) to an acceptance that it the quality of children's relationships with their non-resident parents, usually fathers (Featherstone 2003), as influential in how children see themselves and others.

As Wells (2009:71) observes 'we [adults] think of children as belonging to families' and within the thirty-two Core Assessments the term 'family' was documented within the children's identity sections seventy-six times, with eleven elaborations employed to explain the family further (i.e., paternal; immediate; unit; network). For example:

Warren is familiar with his large *family network* and will often talk to his mother, maternal grandmother and grandfather about additional family members, asking what they are doing and why they are not coming to visit him.

*Warren, age 4. Core Assessment 8 (combined assessment).*

Kenton has a clear understanding of his *immediate family* and can name significant members of his family. He is aware of that Mr. Clarke is his birth father and accepts the fact that his family live separately. Kenton is well adjusted to the situation but can be headstrong and can manipulate situations during times when he is denied contact with his father and older siblings.

*Kenton, age 14. Core Assessment 6.*

As can be noted, the workers did not simply conflate child and family as some single entity. Rather a number of assessments assigned the child a 'position within the family', thereby reinforcing the notion of child-as-agent within his/her family (Crouter and Booth 2003). Eight assessments made reference to the child's position within the family, commonly with this highlighted as an area of need/concern, for example:

Dominic presents as a caring child who is aware that he is the oldest of three siblings. Dominic presents as being very confused and angry about *his position within his family*. He seems unclear about his role as either the man of the house or a child having no male role model and the need to crave attention from his mother as a child.

*Dominic age 13. Core Assessment 10. Emphasis added.*

It may be suggested that although practitioners consider the influence of family as significant to assessments of children's identities this association was commonly a negative one, an aspect of concern. As in Dominic's assessment above, three other assessments made note of the child's 'role within the family'. One assessment of an adolescent boy made observations very similar to those made within Dominic's assessment, although different practitioners undertook both assessments:

Within his nuclear family context, Thierry presents as a child who feels he needs to take charge and control, as he recognises that he is the oldest of three siblings and that his mother often presents as a child herself in terms of her vulnerability. He appears to be *very confused and angry about this position within his family*, as he is *either the man of the house or a child having no male role model and the need to crave attention from his mother*.

*Thierry age 11. Core Assessment 19. Emphasis added.*

It is not uncommon for practitioners to share their ideas, observations and assessments within the closed team setting or to re-use completed assessments as templates for future assessments (White *et al.* 2009)<sup>42</sup>. Whilst such replication is to be expected and indeed encouraged through the advent of e-assessment for what might be termed ‘factual’ information such as age, location, key contacts and shared features such as parental background (see Parton 2008; Shaw *et al.* 2009; White *et al.* 2009), it is more surprising to find replication in identity sections. As mentioned previously, it could be assumed that the identity section would be the one assessment dimension in which practitioners would seize the opportunity to represent the individuality of the child. However this did not appear to be the case, with the similarities within the identity sections outweighing the differences. As stated above, identity appears to be a problematic assessment dimension with the majority of identity sections following a similar format of proxies for identities. Thus the textual convergence within identity sections brings into question the authenticity of some Core Assessments as unique, individualised and child-focused documents. However, it is important to consider the one identity section that did not make reference to the child’s familial relationships within the identity section. This identity section considered a 14 year old male, who was living in an out-of-county foster placement:

Charlie lacks confidence in his educational abilities and always says that he cannot do his homework. However, having a positive educational experience at [pupil referral unit] has increased his confidence and made him feel proud of his achievements.

Charlie is aware of his musical abilities and enjoys performing to other people, who encourage and praise him.

Charlie has experienced bullying both at school and outside of school. Charlie talks about how he was called names at school such as ‘itchy pants’, ‘skidders’ and ‘smelly’. He has described how a 10 year old child in his street used to throw stones at him and how a five year old child used to throw sticks at him.

Charlie feels accepted within his foster placement and enjoys being there. He describes it as ‘fantastic’ and has said ‘I really do like it here’. He appreciates the way he is being cared for in his placement, and sees this as different to how he was cared for at home.

*Charlie, age 14 years. Core Assessment 28.*

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<sup>42</sup> Within the data set three sibling assessments consisted primarily of replicated text with the names of the children ‘cut and pasted’.



We can note from this extract that the practitioner makes no reference to Charlie's relationship with his parents and wider family members. The practitioner appears to have framed the assessment within the temporal 'here and now', with focus placed on Charlie's integration into foster care and a new educational provision. This may be an example of the practitioner employing temporality to demonstrate the progress Charlie is considered to have made, with the practitioner skilfully contrasting his past experiences of education with more current developments. Further, there appears a rhetorical moral undertone within this extract suggesting that Charlie's experiences of life at home were not as *fantastic* as his life in care. Chapter Nine records Charlie's parents' dissatisfaction with the assessment and their perceived exclusion from the assessment process. Indeed, the above extract may represent another feature of assessments identified by the parents and carers of the subject children, that in some instances practitioners craft their assessments to ensure that desired organisational outcomes will be achieved (as discussed in Chapter Nine). However, we may only speculate that the exclusion of Charlie's familial relationships within his identity section is an instance of a practitioner framing the assessment to reflect the organisational view that Charlie's parents are inadequate and that he should not be returned to their care (as in Vojak 2009). Nonetheless, this unique example of familial relationships being omitted within Charlie's identity section may reveal more about how the practitioner perceived his parents identities than those of the child.

### **Depicting familial relationships**

The Assessment Framework (National Assembly for Wales 2001a, 23: 1.33) advises 'the significance of seeing and observing the child throughout the assessment cannot be overstated' and within the assessments in this study a range of information gathering techniques could be noted. When presenting information about children's familial relationships information was gained either through observations of a young child's attachments or more generalized narrative accounts of older children's relationships. For example, some assessments, such as in Emily's identity section below, viewed identity explicitly through observations of attachment behaviours, whereas for older children, such as Robbie below, attachments were described less clearly:

Since [date] Emily has resided in Local Authority foster care. Her primary carer is now her foster carer. This will affect Emily's level of attachment to her father. However it is significant that Emily has been able to form healthy attachments in her formative months. Emily is able to recognise her father, and readily smiles upon seeing him. When distressed her father comforts Emily appropriately. Emily needs to be raised in an environment that values her individuality, whilst acknowledging that she is a part of a wider familial and societal unit.

*Emily, age 5 months .Core Assessment 5.*

Robbie has a clear understanding of his immediate family and knows his birth father, Brian, although he does not have a secure relationship with his father. It is not clear from the work undertaken with him so far as to what sense of coherence he has about his life, for example, when and why his father left the household. *Robbie, age 9. Core Assessment 1.*

As such, the familial relationships of younger children tended to be demonstrated through an analysis of attachments behaviours: *Emily is able to recognise her father, and readily smiles upon seeing him.* Such descriptions of young children's attachment behaviours appeared common-place within the data set, resulting in assessments of identities that record not only the attachment behaviours of the child but also the responses of his/her carer: *when distressed her father comforts Emily appropriately.* White (1998:269) identified this feature of assessments within health care, observing:

Professional assessment of this mother-infant dyad, involves the surveillance of intimate relations. By scrutinizing the *minutiae* of interactions, smiling, eye contact and so forth, the child health professional is charged with the identification of those at *risk* of developing maladjustments.  
(Emphasis original).

Thus, as suggested by White (1998:271) 'the child's body becomes the repository for, and the measure of, 'good enough' parenting'. However such detailed examination of the attachments of older children did not occur within the data set of this study and if discussed little supporting evidence was explicit, e.g., *[Robbie] knows his birth father, Brian, although he does not have a secure relationship with his father.* It is possible that evidence of a child's attachment behaviours are more visible in younger children and as such, more observable and readily available to practitioners than attachments in older children. When the attachments of older children are depicted,

such as Dominic, Thierry and Robbie above, they are described in more general, less explicit terms. The reason for this may be two-fold. Firstly, it may be suggested that practitioners are more able to apply their knowledge of attachment theory to younger children. Although, some of the literature readily available to practitioners clearly signposts the reader to understanding attachments in older children (for example, Cairns 2002), more commonly attachment texts focus on the early years (such as Howe 1995; Robinson 1997). This may result in practitioners not having sufficient familiarity with theoretical knowledge to explain attachments in older children. Secondly, and related to the former, practitioners may consider early attachments as less developed and more simplistic, making them more accessible and as such easier to grasp and assess. In essence, the accessibility of sources of information may influence how the impact of children's familial relationships in relation to their identities are constructed and discussed within assessments.

In summary, across the assessments practitioners appear to demonstrate knowledge of developmental theories and employ this knowledge in their assessments, creating a notion of familial identities as proxies for individual identities. However by focusing their attentions on this perspective, the child's agency is frequently overlooked by practitioners. As such, the objectification of children could be observed within the identity sections, with the children constructed as social beings rather than social agents (James 2000). This is associated with the propensity to consider children's attachments as proxies for identities (as discussed in Chapter Six) and is likely to be rooted in the value placed on attachment theory in contemporary child care work (Taylor 2004; Barth *et al.* 2005). Later in this chapter I discuss how these proxies for identities may have become legitimised, however, as noted above, alongside an assessment of the child's familial attachments and relationships, practitioners frequently considered children's self-esteem within their written constructions of children's identities, as I discuss next.

### **Self-esteem as a proxy for identities**

An assessment of the child's '*self image and self esteem*' (National Assembly for Wales 2001b: 19) is made prominent within the practice guidance accompanying the Assessment Framework as forming part of the child's identity needs. This appears to reflect the tendency in western cultures, in which individualism is a dominant

ideology, to seek out and value self-esteem (Crocker and Park 2003). Further, in social work much has been made of the links between self-esteem and a child's level of resilience (Fergusson and Lynskey 1996; Gilligan 1997; Daniel and Wassell 2002). As such, it is of no surprise that self-esteem was mentioned in eleven assessments (34.4%) within the data set.

Practitioners, when discussing children's self-esteem, used such terms as 'sense of self', 'positive self-image' and 'self-confidence' interchangeably. Within the interview data there appeared broadly shared views about the importance of self-esteem to a child's sense of positive identity. However explicitly drawing connections between identity and self-esteem in the assessment proved problematic for some practitioners. As Sioned, assistant team manager, explains:

I suppose if you have a low self-esteem and a low opinion of yourself you could be more fluid in your identity. Cos you might want to change a bit of it because you want to please people or you want to impress people, and your, your sense of identity is validated by what people think of you. You haven't got that hard, sort of, core of identity yourself, not secure enough to think 'I don't really mind what people think of me because I know that I'm really quite a nice person' and really that's what you want your own child to be isn't it? And I suppose a low self-esteem can give you a fragile sense of self in that you might feel that you've got to please everyone, control others, and it can skew you then. It can be a bit skewed and that's probably why you have got a low self-esteem and I don't know whether it's the chicken or the egg there.

*Sioned, assistant team manager.*

Sioned speaks of the need for individuals to feel *secure enough* in their attachments and goes on to consider that without this sense of personal security *you could be more fluid in your identity*, wanting to *change* oneself to *please* or *impress* others. Our ability to regulate our self-presentation during social interactions has been observed by Goffman (1959:4):

When an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey.

Above, we can observe how Sioned employs similar ideas about self-presentation to make a common-sense connection between self-esteem and identity. Once again a distinction is made between elements of identity that are perceived to be more malleable than the *hard, sort of, core of identity* that Sioned believes to be strengthened by ‘validation’ from others. The importance of validation from others to our sense of personal identity is recognised by a number of theorists, primarily derived from the work of James ([1890] 1950; see Chapter 3) who propose that the self is in part dependent on appraisals received from others and will respond to these appraisals as one feels fit. In many respects, practitioners’ assessments of children’s self-esteem are such appraisals and it is significant that nine of the eleven identity sections that considered a child’s self-esteem are imbued with what White (1997b) terms ‘the notion of fragile childhoods’. These underlying themes are important because, as Goffman’s (1968b) work on spoiled identity and Michael White’s (2001) notion of negative identity demonstrates, such constructions becomes enduring. They frame not only society’s perceptions and willingness to provide services and resources but as Michael White (2001: 3) notes, ‘when these negative identity conclusions are more enduring, people experience them to be quite capturing of their lives’.

Further, these identity sections provide examples of moral reasoning in how the children’s parents should be performing. For example:

It is likely that Stephanie is developing a fragile self-esteem; because of the inconsistency and at times chaotic care she has been afforded by her mother. Reinforcing this perhaps is the fact that she is no longer living with her mother, which she may interpret as rejection.

*Stephanie, age 4. Core Assessment 2.*

Ruby appears to have low self-esteem, and lacks in confidence. Ruby’s self-worth appears to be enmeshed with meeting her mother’s needs, as her perception of herself is that of her mother’s carer. This is reflected in her refusal to attend school, and her association with people younger than she is. Ruby shared no aspirations as to what she would like for the future, however she shared that should she engage in employment, it would need to be ‘something simple’ and ‘local’, to arrange around caring for her mother.

*Ruby, age 15. Core Assessment 11.*

As the reader will note, the practitioner's assessments of the child's self-esteem are simply that: the practitioner's assessment. As the narrator of the assessment the practitioner appears to have excluded the views of Stephanie, Ruby and their mothers, as well as other significant people, if sought. Within these extracts Stephanie's mother is noted as being *inconsistent* and *chaotic* and Ruby's lack of aspirations appears located within her role of *her mother's carer*. As such we can observe how Ruby and Stephanie's mothers are constructed as inadequate and thereby not appropriate witnesses or 'trusted teller[s] of the tale' (Smith 1993 in Hall 1997). Thus by breeching the acceptable norms of parenting, these mothers appear to have lost the right to be considered as reliable and accountable witnesses. Further, there is no suggestion that Ruby might gain some internal sense of self-worth or esteem through being a carer for her mother (as in Frank 2002; Aldridge and Becker 2003). As noted by Brown (1993) self-esteem involves an evaluative affect and thus is more akin to liking or feeling good about oneself than to having self-confidence. By utilising the contextual quality of life discourse (Casas 2000. see also Chapter Two) and consulting with children, the practitioners might have gleaned a more positive account of the children's self-perception and self-esteem.

It would appear that Stephanie and Ruby's opinions, like their mothers, have been excluded due to them being cast outside the norm: constructing them as different. The implicit categorization of Ruby, her mother and Stephanie's mother as different and the subsequent exclusion and devaluing of their opinions can be interpreted as a form of stigmatisation – the act of assigning categories and labels in recognition of undesirable differences (Abrams *et al.* 2005:19). As such, through drawing attention to the silenced voice of, in this instance, the children and their mothers, we begin to see that practitioners assessments of children's identities may be more morally laden than first considered.

### **Practitioners' discretion in the assessment of children's self-esteem**

Two assessments did not assess the child's sense of esteem as a concern, but rather included the dimension as a routine, or usual, childhood need. As the reader will note these extracts represent self-esteem as a common-sense, taken-for-granted feature in the acquirement of a healthy identity, with the concept of universal childhood 'needs' represented as 'authoritative statements of facts' (Taylor 2004: 231):

Leon, like any other child needs to know his place within the family and to be a valued member of it. In order to develop a strong sense of identity, and self-esteem, he needs consistency of care from at least one primary care giver who will provide him with consistent and supportive parenting.

*Leon, age 9. Core Assessment 20.*

This concerns Tamsin's growing sense of self as a separate and valued person. This includes her view of self and her abilities, her self image and self esteem and having a positive sense of her individuality, feelings of belonging and acceptance by family, peers and the wider community.

*Tamsin, age 10 months. Core Assessment 32.*

Here it would appear practitioners, and of course the practice guidance (elements of which are reproduced verbatim in Tamsin's assessment) generate a common-sense connection between a child's self-esteem, their identities and their experiences of being parented. Daniel *et al.* (1999:215) reflect this in their bold, and theoretically challengeable, statement: '[t]he roots of self-esteem lie firmly in early attachment experiences'. As such, it would appear that a direct correlation between self-esteem and parenting has become legitimated for some. However, what these extracts show further is a lack of conceptual depth as to the ways in which self-esteem has impacted upon the children's identities. Rather one is left with the impression that, on occasion, practitioners include some aspects of identity in these examples self-esteem, in order to 'get the job done' with some elements of the practice guidance included in assessments more as a box-ticking exercise rather than to add depth and understanding (see, for example, Booth *et al.* 2006).

However, as one practitioner noted, this finding may simply reflect the pressure experienced by practitioners to ensure that assessments are needs led:

Things like self-esteem will differ and maybe I wouldn't think to comment if someone had positive self-esteem. Maybe I would only comment if it wasn't, which is probably a problem in itself 'cos if someone has good self-esteem it is important to reflect that.

*Rebecca, social worker.*

Thus, it is suggested above that when children's self-esteem is not assessed as being problematic, practitioners tend not to make this explicit in assessments. Given that

twenty-one assessments from the data set of thirty-two (65.6%) made no reference to the child's self-esteem, this may well be the case. As such it is possible that practitioners tend to ignore, or take for granted, positive self-esteem and do not consider that as pertinent to their assessments. As noted in Chapter Four, the Assessment Framework by definition is an assessment of need with the concept of needs-led services being enshrined in law. Within a system focused on needs it is perhaps unsurprising that practitioners tend to focus their assessments on this task, and may thereby gloss over the more positive aspects of the child. As Rebecca observes *maybe I wouldn't think to comment if someone had positive self-esteem*. This might suggest that practitioners are completing assessments against tight deadlines and that their focus is more likely to be needs than strengths (Iverson *et al.* 2005).

However there may also be another reason why an assessment of the child's self-esteem may not be included when practitioners assess a child's identities. There appeared to be professional caution in assessing children's levels of self-esteem within the formal assessment process:

I do think that self-esteem for children is hugely important, and because it can be affected by so many factors. But it isn't an exact science and I don't think that there are any hard and fast ways of assessing self-esteem. But you can make observations about it. I don't think that you can be categorical about what the child's self-esteem is... your self-esteem can be different at different stages of your life. So your self-esteem can be good but it doesn't mean that your self-esteem will be good forever does it?

*Chantelle, social worker.*

As with other practitioners, Chantelle suggests that an individual's self-esteem is dynamic. Much of how we come to understand self-esteem today is derived from James' ([1890] 1950)<sup>43</sup> seminal work in which he proposed a two-part conceptualisation of self-esteem. For James, individuals hold an innate trait level of self-esteem which although typically is independent from one's environment and circumstance, fluctuations around the trait level of esteem occur and reflect changes in circumstance and responses to successes and failures. Clearly James' essentialist ideas about trait level self-esteem do not sit comfortably with a social constructionist

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<sup>43</sup> See Harter (1993, 1999) for empirical treatment of James' ideas about self-esteem.



viewpoint, however it is the latter point, that self-esteem is a fluid and contingent entity, which is of value here. Chantelle notes, *your self-esteem can be good but it doesn't mean that your self-esteem will be good forever does it?* Here the temporal element of assessment is brought to the fore. It is suggested that unlike the familial relationships discussed above, self-esteem is perceived as more transient, and thereby more difficult to capture in assessment. Consequently, self-esteem as a routine component of identity was seen as an equally dynamic and volatile concept as identity itself. Thus, like the notion of identity, self-esteem appears an area that caused difficulties for some practitioners.

Raising questions as to practitioners' authority to assess self-esteem, Chantelle states that assessing an individual's self-esteem *isn't an exact science* and rather than providing a *categorical* assessment of it, she feels that practitioners are best placed to present an impression or perspective – an *observation* as she notes. Here the respondent's comments find congruence with Taylor and White's (2006) suggestion of 'respectful uncertainty' as the most appropriate position for practitioners when considering children's self-esteem. As such we move away from the demand for certainty (Smith 2001) to acknowledge that assessing another's subjectivity is not *an exact science*. Thus we return to Parton and O'Byrne's (2000) conceptualisation of social work as a practical-moral activity rather than a rational-technical one.

Above it has been demonstrated that children's self esteem is conceptualised by practitioners as contingent and temporal. Hence whilst some workers seem more comfortable with their assessments being cast as more suggestive than conclusive; others appear to exclude self-esteem as a routine component of their assessments. Thereby, despite being seen as significant to the child's identities, it is possible that practitioners are reluctant to provide their explicit professional assessment of children's self-esteem due to the dynamic nature of self-esteem and professional acknowledgment that implicating a sense of certainty is not always appropriate. As such, it would appear that the inclusion of self-esteem as a component of identities is unhelpful for some, and poses practitioners with conceptual difficulties similar to those posed by identity itself.

### **The legitimisation of identity construction**

As discussed, familial relationships and self-esteem appear to be routine, and the most frequently cited, themes that social workers include within the identity section of the Core Assessment. The use of attachments, familial identities and self-esteem as ‘what stands for’ identities appears to be an accepted norm in this sample of practice and would seem to have become legitimised through repeated and unchallenged usage. As Gergen (2009:10-11) notes, social constructions gain their significance from their social utility: if we do not continue to speak the way we do, then our long-standing traditions of cultural life are under threat. As such it is possible that practitioners are being socialised into employing attachments, familial identities and self-esteem as proxies for identities through a process of personal internalisation and organisational legitimisation (see Berger and Luckmann 1966). The point that all the assessments within the data set will have been deemed to be of acceptable standard suggests that this construction of children’s identities has become legitimised in practice. As such, it would appear acceptable practice to construct a child’s identities through the use of these elements. However, there were other aspects of identity highlighted to a lesser extent within the Core Assessments: nationality, culture, religious and spiritual beliefs. I discuss these and other aspects of assessment content in Chapter Eight where I contrast the construction of children’s identities compared to adult identities.

### **Summary**

It has been argued in this chapter that the assessment of identities is a complex, multifaceted task, which entails practitioners moving into conceptual fields that test their skills in capturing this dynamic notion. For most practitioners ‘identity’ as a distinct and separate assessment dimension presents challenges, and most struggle to distinguish elements of a child’s identities from other assessment dimensions. It would appear that there are varying degrees of practitioner confidence and competence in undertaking a clear articulation of identities in their assessments. Several practitioners find the task problematic and tend to rely on formal knowledge, such as the practice guidance, in order to make sense of this assessment dimension.

Within the interview and Core Assessment data it was evident that practitioners considered children’s identities as malleable and subject to change. In an attempt to overcome the difficulties encountered in assessing a dynamic entity, it would appear

that attachments, familial identities and self-esteem have become legitimised as proxies for the child's identities. However this comes at a cost in that pursuing ideas of the child's identities and self esteem within the family and associated developmental theories, practitioners run the risk of ignoring the child's agency in actively constructing their *own* identities.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Constructing Childhood Identities**

#### **Introduction**

So far, it has been suggested that practitioners perceive identity to be a multi-faceted and dynamic concept and that the very nature of identity problematises the assessment task. In an attempt to manage the task practitioners tend to rely on ideas from developmental theories in structuring their assessments. However, practitioner reliance on this body of knowledge can create a notion of the child as a passive recipient, a *tabula rasa* awaiting adult input. Perceiving children in such a manner may lead to some exclusion of accounts of children's agency to create relationships and identities of their own. This chapter continues to explore the data set of thirty-two Core Assessments and interviews with practitioners to determine whether background assumptions and common-sense knowledge held by workers about children and childhood shape the ways in which children's identities are formally represented. This chapter will argue that identities *for* children are constructed typically as more simplistic and less sophisticated than adult identities and that these constructions are informed by discursive ideas of childhood immaturity and naivety.

#### **Dualities: The oppositional dichotomy between childhood and adulthood identities**

As demonstrated in Chapter Two, from Rousseau's depiction of the child's essential innocence, through to the Puritan emphasis upon original sin, to Locke's *tabula rasa*, there are a many different ways to understand what children are like and what childhood is. However, one aspect unites these ideas, and that is the distinction between childhood and adulthood. However, as Prout (2005:34) observes:

The boundary between childhood and adulthood, which modernity erected and kept in place for a substantial period of time, is beginning to blur, introducing all kinds of ambiguities and uncertainties.

It is the extent to which, if any, this *blurring of boundaries* between childhood and adulthood is recognisable within practitioners' assessments that I wish to explore. Within previous chapters it has been suggested that practitioners view their own

identities as evolving from childhood to adulthood and this conceptualisation of identities is further explored in this chapter where we shall see that practitioners view children's identities as dissimilar to adult identities: less socially sophisticated, more malleable. As such, it is proposed that, when considering identities, practitioners maintained a conceptual distinction between adult and children's identities, or as Prout (2005:11) terms it, an 'oppositional dichotomy' (see also Taylor 2004). As one practitioner explained in interview:

I think maybe as an adult, and I think that this is a difference between adults and children, an adult identity is to do with things like social status and jobs, and so forth. But when you are a child that maybe isn't as significant. I suppose still where they fit into society maybe, but I wouldn't necessarily think that a child would think about that.

*Rose, social worker.*

The above extract would suggest a view that the identities of children and adults may be considered as bounded and distinct. The worker states that adult identities tend to be constructed with regard to social status and occupational role and that children *think* about their identities differently and are likely to exclude reference to their social purpose. This view may be challenged in the findings of Children's Rights Alliance for England (2007 in Chapter Two) and to some extent by research into working children, such as Woodhead (1998: 29) who advises 'work does not simply affect young people. It is part of their activity and it becomes part of their identity'. None of the children in this study were working children and as such a comparison with Woodhead's findings is not possible. However what the above extract from Rose implies is that, firstly, children may be seen less as social actors and more as social becomings (Lee 2001; Christensen 2004): a belief that appears commonplace within the way practitioners construct identities for children. Secondly, it is implied that children accept this differentiation and do not perceive *social status and jobs* as *significant* to how they view themselves. As such it is inferred that children can be considered as content with a more basic, uncomplicated identity and that, due to their age and immaturity, cannot understand and do not engage with the multi-faceted influences that social status and wider institutional relations have on more developed adult identities (see Higonet 1998). Such ideas may stem from and reinforce the notion of childhood innocence and naivety, which sets children apart from the persons

they will become (Ennew 1986). This dichotomy is apparent in one practitioner's account of her own identity as a child:

I think it [identity in childhood] would be more simplistic, and it would be more so, I wouldn't be able to analyse it as I am a child. So it would be about what I liked and what I didn't like. So it would be about who my best friend was. I think it would contain the same sort of information but much simpler, you know, 'I've got a Mum, a Dad and a brother, I go to this school'. So it would still contain bits about my personality, my likes, dislikes but my view of the world would be narrower.

*Chantelle, social worker.*

Chantelle differentiates between adult and childhood identities suggesting that identities in childhood may be *more simplistic* containing information comparable to that of adult identities but *much simpler*. Like Rose, above, Chantelle implies that a possible explanation for this dichotomy lies in the hands of the child and their intellectual inferiority, observing that as a child *I wouldn't be able to analyse it [identity]*'. Thereby, reminiscent of Piagetian ideas on cognitive development (1959)<sup>44</sup>, it is implied that children do not have the cognitive capacity to acquire or grasp more sophisticated, multi-faceted identities. It is thus assumed that due to children's cognitive immaturity their identities are less developed than adult identities and can be considered as so. This in turn legitimates an adult mandate to construct identities *for* children and reinforces the view that children are incomplete, human becomings (Lee 2001; Christensen 2004).

It is commonplace within the popular discourses of childhood that children are constructed as needing adult protection guidance and regulation (see Archard 1993; Butler and Williamson 1994a). This discourse is pertinent for this study as the children subject to assessments were commonly subjects of care proceedings (twenty-four children, 75%), and as such were deemed in need of protection from their potentially harmful parent(s). However it also appears acceptable to construct children's identities in comparison with adult identities. Thus, rather than reflecting Alderson's (1990: 130) assertion that 'children have more in common with adults than differences from them', identities in childhood appear constructed (as in Derrida's [1976] work) from a recognition of what they are not, e.g., adult identities. Such

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<sup>44</sup> See Donaldson (1978), Alderson (2000) and Burman (2008) for critiques of Piaget's theory of children's cognitive development and competence.

practice encourages ‘childhood’ to be viewed not through the experience of individual children, but as a ‘distinct, separate and fundamentally different social group or category’ (Gittens 2004:27). Hence childhoods and childhood identities can be seen as having meaning in the context of an oppositional dichotomy with adult identities<sup>45</sup>. The existence of an oppositional dichotomy between adult and child identities is also detectable in aspects of the assessments of children’s identities, as I discuss next.

### **Childhood as the origin of national identity**

Scourfield *et al.* (2006:149) explore how a person’s identification with nationality and culture begins in childhood stating that ‘we can conclude that children do exercise agency in constructing identities from limited resources (they do not simply soak up and regurgitate them), yet always within pretty strict limits’. Drawing on the ideas of Vygotsky (1962, 1978), Gellner (1983:61) describes educational experience as profoundly influential on how children learn about themselves and others: ‘the culture in which one has been *taught* to communicate becomes the core of one’s identity’ (*italics original*, in Scourfield *et al* 2006). Similarly, Garcia-Coll *et al.* (2004) reveal children’s high levels of awareness of ethnic categories at a young age and how they develop increasingly sophisticated, elaborate and creative ways of registering their complex identities. Thus, a child’s sense of nationality and culture is an important aspect within the assessment of children’s identities and is recognised within the practice guidance accompanying the Assessment Framework which encourages practitioners to consider: ‘race, religion...belonging and acceptance by family, peer group and wider society, including other cultural groups’ (National Assembly for Wales 2001b: 19). However, this aspect of identity formation was seldom referred to in the thirty-two assessments in this data set.

Interestingly, nationality was raised by most practitioners when self-reporting their own identities. Even Frances, who struggled to explain her own identity, was able to highlight her nationality as an important element of her identities:

Gosh (laughs) to be honest, I’ve read and re-read that one [question] and I haven’t got the faintest idea! I, well the only

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<sup>45</sup> This phenomenon can also be observed in practitioners frequent employment of attachment theories to bolster their assessments of children’s identities, as discussed in the previous chapters.

thing I can think of is Welsh. Um, (laughs) it's just not something that I've ever thought about!

*Frances, social worker.*

Practitioners typically viewed their national and cultural heritage as important to their own identities (as in Hall 1992). Indeed, it is important to observe that a national and ethnic identity is something that we all have; this is not some characteristic reserved for the ethnic or cultural 'other' (de Beauvoir 1968). It was surprising therefore to note that only five (15.6%) assessments made reference to the child's nationality and cultural heritage within the identity section. For example:

Yusef identifies with White Welsh culture and his present surroundings reflect this.

*Yusef, age 7. Core Assessment 17.*

Hayley identifies with White Welsh culture and her present surroundings reflect this.

*Hayley, age 3. Core Assessment 22 (combined assessment).*

The same practitioner penned both these assessments and therefore the textual closeness may be an example of a practitioner simply employing some assessment shorthand but this still reflects the preferred view of identity in these two cases. However it is the lack of application as to what the *White Welsh culture* means to the children, and their families that is of relevance here. The extracts show the analytical shallowness that Howe (1996) identified in that there is no apparent need to explain why the children's culture may be important to them, rather one is left with the sense that the child's national heritage has been included simply to 'get the job done'. This reflects Horwath's (2002:201) suggestion that 'professionals are aware of the need to take account of race and culture but are often unclear how to do this in practical terms'. Another assessment highlighted the child's nationality within the identity section, implying that the child's cultural needs could be 'read' off from nationality, and be introduced as care planning:

Jack was born to White British parents and as such is a White British child. Jack was placed within a White British foster family. *Jack, age 8 months. Assessment 21*

The reader may well be wondering what *is* the impact of Jack's nationality and culture on his sense of self? For although it may be difficult to determine this given his young



age, it is somehow implied that consideration has been given to this aspect of identity in his care planning. The typical lack of reference to a child's nationality suggests that children were not asked about this aspect of identity within the assessment process. Yet children do often have clear views about this theme, such as one child who asserts nation in his 'story about me' exercise:

Don't bully me and don't kick and punch me. Don't give me fish [to eat]. Red is my favourite colour. I support Manchester United. *I am Welsh so don't call me English.*  
*Steve-o, age 10 years. Core Assessment 15. Emphasis added.*

Within his story Steve-o invokes his nationality and is clearly able to distinguish being *Welsh* from being *English*, a point not highlighted in any section of his assessment. Further, Steve-o offered his comments freely, without prompting from myself suggesting that nationality and culture is an aspect of identity about which children are aware and may hold strong views (see, for example, Scourfield *et al.* (2006). The relative absence of nationality and culture as influences upon a child's identity stands in some contrast to how practitioners spoke of their own nationality and the impact of this on their lives and identities. For example:

My children are Welsh, they see themselves as Welsh. They were born in Wales and that's something that I sometimes have to take stock of because I think, well they sing all the Welsh rugby songs and, you know, Harry is pointing things out in Welsh and saying things in Welsh words and I have to think 'well I don't know nothing about this' but this is his culture and its really important for him. And we just had St David's Day and I just had to go out and buy the Welsh outfit and I had no idea what to buy and I was actually queuing up at the till with an outfit before I realised it was a dress! And I had to go back then, and that's true! (laughs). And I just had no clue and that's what it must be like for people further a field, coming in and thinking 'what the hell are you supposed to do?' If they had asked me to dress him up as an Egyptian I think I would of have a better idea, you know. And here isn't a million miles away from where I'm from but I still don't know about it and he will grow up knowing about it, this will mean something to Harry but it means absolutely nothing to me.  
*Lola, social worker.*

Coming from a White, Welsh speaking background, I had, you know, I met a lot of people from different ethnic backgrounds and my mother was from the medical professional so that, and I

had my own experience myself. When I was on the bus with my mother and the man in front of us, I was about 3 or 4, and said, I remember shouting, 'Dyn Du, Dyn Du' and pointing at this man, which means 'black man' and my mother saying to me 'stop doing that, stop doing that' and in the end she just ended up saying to the man 'oh he doesn't know, you know, he's saying in Welsh that you are a black man and he's never seen a black man before' and the guy was really good and he came over and played and so we kind of broke down those barriers and you know, its something saying, a child saying 'black man' doesn't necessarily mean negative things, you learn from those and it was a positive experience about being from different cultures, and different backgrounds, ethnicities, it breaks down a lack of understanding doesn't it? You know languages don't close doors, cultures don't close doors, only people close doors.

*Gethin, social worker.*

The above extracts have been selected to demonstrate, to varying degrees, practitioners' perceptions of how their nationality and culture have influenced how they appraise their own identities, and the identities of their children. Comments such as these are reminiscent of Scourfield *et al.* (2006) who found that children learn a sense of nationality and culture from the immediate, if sometimes limited, resources they have available to them. However for the purpose of this discussion it would appear that practitioners are more able to articulate the influence of culture and nationality on their own identities as well as those of their children than upon the subject children in assessments. This may be because the practitioners, of course, know their own children better than the children with whom they work, however it is also possible that, as in the discussions regarding children's self-esteem in the previous chapter, children's nationality and the importance of culture upon how children perceive themselves may be a taken-for-granted area. Alternatively, the complexities of applying nationality and culture to identities may be an area that practitioners do not feel able or comfortable addressing and one that they shy away from in their direct work with children.

One further observation about the omission of children's nationality and culture within the assessment documents needs mention. As argued in the previous chapter there appear to be elements of identity that practitioners view as more static than others, and nationality emerges as an aspect that workers consider to be more or less fixed. As Rose explains:

I think that the fact that I am Welsh is always going to be, it's always going to be the same. But I think that in the fact of being Welsh, if you asked me whether I was say, Welsh or Scottish when I was say, five, I might have been able to tell you that I was Welsh, or maybe older, but you know, through younger childhood I would have said 'yeah, I'm Welsh'. How much that meant to me at a young age differs very much to how it is now, it's more significant for me now so it's a static feature in that it hasn't changed but my feelings about it have changed.

*Rose, social worker.*

Rose offers a perspective that nationality is an aspect of identity that, in her view, is likely to remain unchanged throughout the life course. Many writers (see for example, Hall 1990; Gilroy 1993) challenge this notion of nationality as static. Moreover, with the increase of immigration, geographic mobility and globalisation we are perhaps more aware of the national and ethnic identities of others and are able to borrow from others styles and symbols to use in fresh and creative ways in constructing our own identities. As such, identities may be a matter of personal creation rather than innate, inherited or geographically determined (Hall 1992). It is perhaps difficult then to understand why practitioners may not feel confident referring to a child's nationality within the assessment document. For if nationality is perceived as fixed then the assessment cannot reasonably be challenged. However as Rose states *it's more significant for me now so it's a static feature in that it hasn't changed but my feelings about it have changed*. This suggests that aspects of identity are both subjective and given and it may be difficult for practitioners to discuss with children what their nationality means to them. Also there may be some assumption that children will not understand, or be able to articulate, what their nationality and culture means to them and how they see themselves. As such, it is possible that the general exclusion of nationality, or at least the lack of reference to nationality within assessment of children's identities, is another example of practitioners simplifying children's identities.

Cleaver and Walker (2004:208) in their study of the impact of the Assessment Framework found a 'paucity of recording in relation to ethnicity' with a child's ethnicity recorded, albeit nominally, in fifty-four of the sixty-eight core assessments analysed (see also Williams and Soydan 2005). However within this data set the majority of assessments (twenty-seven, 84.37%) did not include reference to the child's cultural identity and this omission was an area discussed in interviews. Their

responses suggest that practitioners acknowledged the importance of culture in identity development and the exclusion of this in assessment being more a matter of oversight or due to it not being seen as a pressing issue:

Well I thought that I used *Working Together* to guide me, but when I was looking back over it, there is plenty that I have missed out. As in, its only Jack's<sup>46</sup> one [assessment] in which I have commented on his cultural identity... but I don't think that Jack's cultural identity was more relevant to him than any of the other children, um, and so I think that that must've just been an error that I haven't included that in anyone else's.

*Rebecca, social worker.*

It is possible that such oversights occur yet reading the above extract one is reminded of the checklist model of assessment, where aspects of an individual's life are assessed not because of their conceptual worth to the assessment but to 'get the job done' (Corby 2000; Beckett 2001). Further, it would appear that Rebecca, as the assessing practitioner, was content with her inclusion of ethnicity within Jack's identity section. This too is suggestive of a checklist mentality to assessments, for as noted above, Jack's cultural heritage is mentioned within his assessment but its inclusion is surface level (Howe 1996), adding little to an understanding of what Jack's cultural heritage may mean to him.

None of the children within the sample were considered to have specific cultural needs, which affected the development of their identities. As such, it might be suggested that to have a cultural identity need was considered as unusual. As one practitioner explained:

Well, I might have thought that I did identity well but not, well I've not been pulled up on it, but with Yasmine<sup>47</sup> because she was Asian and had a different ethnicity, a different ethic background, her ethnicity, her culture, her, well she was a Buddhist and she came from [Asia] and I spoke to her about that and her cultural identity and where she saw herself and I also did some research on the practices over there and I learnt a lot from that, and her assessment and her care plan reflected that.

*So do you think cultural identity is easily taken for granted?*

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<sup>46</sup> Jack, age 8 months. Assessment 21

<sup>47</sup> Yasmine's assessment was completed outside of the sampling timescale in this study and therefore is not part of the data set.

Well I'd say so because I'd never thought about my own identity until the icebreaker questions, and I know that some assessments just say 'White/Welsh' and no thought is given to it. I think because Yasmine was from a different cultural background, and was clearly different, I was pulled up on 'make sure you cover this and that in her care plan, her background' and children born in Dockside don't get that. They don't get that detail and, um, the service, you know, it's just White/Welsh and it's not right really is it? 'Cos if they were all the same, if we were all the same than, well it's not right is it? Everyone, every child is different, and we need to think about that.

*Olivia, social worker.*

Within this extract the practitioner attempts to redress the issues of culture through the rhetorical device of constructing children as consumers. As can be noted Olivia deploys implicit suggestions as to quality and appropriateness of services to highlight her questioning of the value base of the organisation (see Newman and Clarke 1994): the 'fact' that Yasmine *was clearly different* resulted in the practitioner placing special emphasis on that part of the assessment, whereas for other children it is suggested that their cultural needs are not considered in such detail, especially if their cultural heritage is the norm. It is suggested that Yasmine as an Asian child living in Wales was *different*; an 'unusual' child, as within the Puritan child discourse (De Moura 2002) or perhaps Yasmine has been identified for her 'otherness' (de Beauvoir 1968). Thereby, to justify the 'fact' that Yasmine was 'othered', Olivia reports speech and uses active voicing (*I was pulled up on 'make sure you cover this and that in her care plan, her background'*) in order to help establish her claim that children from the majority cultural heritage *don't get that detail and, um, the service* (cf. Wooffitt 1992).

In constructing identities it may be argued that by identifying ourselves, or others, as 'something' automatically excludes ourselves (and others) from being perceived as the 'other' and in this respect identities can be seen as dependent on marking out difference (Kidd 2002). The perceived lack of 'otherness' for the majority of the children within the data set, therefore, may promote unintentionally practices in which children's individual cultural needs are taken for granted. For example, one assessment noted that a mother was of Mediterranean cultural heritage but this fact

was not considered within her child's identity section<sup>48</sup>. However practitioner reflection within the semi-structured interviews suggest that some social workers are aware of the need to be more thorough within their assessment practice and to address culture within the identity sections:

Another thing that I should have reflected upon in Charlie's<sup>49</sup> identity section is that he is placed in England and although he has a strong Welsh identity, because he is placed with an English couple that supports England and are quite patriotic, he almost doesn't have the opportunity to develop his Welsh cultural identity. He has his Welsh rugby top and mug, and when he was in his little school they did more stuff on Wales and being Welsh, but probably now that he is in big, mainstream school, that is more lost I expect. So that, I think that I should have reflected more on that as well.

*Rebecca, social worker.*

Sometimes it is very obvious, if a child comes from a particular religion, for example, by their dress code, you can tell. You can then have preconceptions of what their identity would be. For instance, the father could be very domineering or the males in that family. But I think that in Dockside it's very different, because it is very anglicised. So you are working in a Welsh culture but that is very difficult in Dockside because it is so anglicised, whereas if you go to other parts of Wales it is very obvious to notice the difference and I think that that's the same as me then, you know, I'm quite anglicised if you look at it in that way as I can't speak Welsh and I sound English.

*Benita, student social worker.*

These extracts raise the issue of discrepancy between how social workers explain their routine tasks in interview in contrast to an analysis of the completed task, the assessment document. However, such discrepancy in reporting may be expected for as Pithouse (1998:5) explains:

[S]ocial work is invisible in so far as practitioners do not typically retrieve and analyse the occupational processes that surround their endeavours. Like most of us they rely upon rarely stated motives and taken for granted assumptions in order to accomplish day-to-day routines.

Cultural heritage in identity is seen as important by practitioners in interview but can often be omitted from the formal assessment process as a potentially taken-for-granted or overlooked feature. It appears that only when it is *very obvious to notice*

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<sup>48</sup> Yusef, age 7 years. Assessment 17

<sup>49</sup> Charlie, age 14 years. Core Assessment 28.

*the difference* that this area of identity formation is highlighted. This suggests some notion of ecological fallacy at play (Robinson 1950) in that the children deemed not to be different are overlooked, stereotyping them for their similarity rather than difference. This phenomenon may be exclusive to the Dockside area, however it is more likely that within anglicised areas it is only the ‘othered’ children whose cultural identities come to prominence.

### **Religious/Spiritual identity**

Identity as an element within the child’s developmental needs domain is the only dimension within the Assessment Framework in which a child’s religion is highlighted<sup>50</sup> (National Assembly for Wales 2001b: 19). As such, it can reasonably be expected that when practitioners are organising their assessments, a consideration of the child’s religious or spiritual beliefs would be included within the child’s identity section. Further, the widespread reporting of Lord Laming’s (2003) findings that religious beliefs and practices had a distorting influence on the perceptions of practitioners when determining Victoria Climbié’s circumstances can be seen as an attempt to bring the religious/spiritual beliefs of children, and their care-givers, to the forefront of practitioners’ minds. However, as Horwath and Lees (2008) found, practitioners often lack confidence in exploring religious beliefs and practices with children and their families.

As with nationality, practitioners frequently referred to their own religious/spiritual heritage when speaking about their identities, most notably their identities as a child:

We’d go to a Baptist chapel which all my family go to and if a stranger met me, saw me, I wasn’t, there wasn’t any clothes that I’d wear that you would recognise me as a distinct religion. But if you spend time with me religion was important to me as a child and I would talk about Sunday school, and things that we did with Sunday school, like trips.

*Benita, student social worker.*

When I write about a child who may be 6 or 7, going to church and saying that that is something that they enjoy I often wonder, um, whether, if that child enjoys going to church? Because it

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<sup>50</sup> There is no mention of religion within the parenting capacity domain, although ‘places of worship’ are included within community resources in the family and environmental factors domain.

might have been forced upon them and if I was to assess that child's identity and their religion 10 years later, whether that would be the same case and I suppose being a church, a regular church attender when I was a younger child, up until 15, and enjoying it, and going because I wanted to, but then that changed and I suppose that's where it's important today, you know, in terms of religion. I do tend to write about it but I try to note, you know, what that child's views are, you know, and whether they are being made to go, how much of a family influence is that rather than them making the informed choice to go to church.  
*Rose, social worker.*

Above it can be noted how practitioners recollect religion to be important to them as a child. Thus Benita expresses the view that although *there wasn't any clothes that I'd wear that you would recognise me as a distinct religion* by talking to her, as a child, someone would be able to learn about her spiritual beliefs and her enjoyment in attending Sunday school. Likewise, Rose also notes the importance of not taking a child's religious affiliation for granted by questioning if a child was *making the informed choice*. Thus we may assume that religion is an area that practitioners do explore with children.

Yet the religious/spiritual identities of subject children were highlighted in only two of the thirty-two assessments (6.25%), with both assessments advising that neither child 'practice any religion'. This finds some similarity with Cleaver and Walker's (2004) finding that a child's religion was only recorded in 29% of their data set, suggesting that a child's religion is not routinely considered as an important area of assessment. While practitioners spoke of religion being an influential aspect in their own identities as children and articulated their commitment to ascertaining the religious views of children, there is little evidence within the assessment documents to support this. As such it may be suggested that practitioners did not consider religion and spirituality as a significant aspect in their assessments. It is also interesting to note that no assessment mentioned when a child explicitly stated that they had no religious belief, which arguably could be an important part of their identity as an atheist or humanist or rationalist. As with nationality and culture it may be that religion, too, was considered as too complex an area to contextualise around children's identities (see Horwath and Lees 2008). Further, these findings may support Gilligan and Furness (2006) who suggest that practitioners tend to consider religion either as an



‘add-on’ in assessment or somehow take for granted that common religious views will be held.

This study suggests that practitioners may well construct their own identities and those of intimate others in their lives, as more complex and sophisticated than the identities of the subject children. Reflective of the deficit model of childhood (Archard 1993; Butler and Williamson 1994a), by constructing children’s identities as more basic than those of adults, the discourse of *tabula rasa* can be noted, with childhood seen as a period of development, an apprenticeship for adulthood (Kehily 2004). Informed by the work of John Locke and his notion that children come into the world as blank slates that could, with education and guidance, develop into rational human beings, the discourse of *tabula rasa* clearly distinguishes children from adults (Hendrick 1997). Thereby reinforcing a sense of oppositional dichotomy in which the subject children’s identities are viewed from the perspective of what they are not, i.e., adult identities. Despite expressing in interview a commitment to creating holistic assessments that reflect the views of the children, there seems little evidence to suggest that this occurs. Within the assessment documents children’s identities were constructed in relatively simplistic terms, excluding more socially complex areas such as in the examples given, nationality, culture and religion/spirituality.

The notion that adults bestow identities upon children developed into a significant theme within my analysis and it became apparent that the construction of children’s identities were seen to be more influenced by the actions of adults than by the children. Two central themes arose from this part of my analysis: the impact of the actions of parents on children’s identities and the impact of professional intervention.

### **The impact of parenting experience on children’s identities**

The influence of a child’s parenting experience upon how a child views themselves and their identities plays an important role in the ideas of many key developmental theorists, such as Winnicott (1964), Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) and Ainsworth (1968, 1982). The Assessment Framework is grounded in knowledge underpinned by attachment theory and an ecological approach to assessments and as such it is perhaps unsurprising that practitioners frequently referred to the actions of parents and how these influenced a child’s sense of identity.

The discourse of the 'good parent' (Lawler 2000) views the explicit expression of concern by parents as an indicator of care for the safety of their children. Within the identity sections these normative, moral assumptions as to how parents should respond to their children in meeting identity needs could also be detected. When circumstances digressed from these assumptions, the impact of this upon children's identities was highlighted, as in the extracts from identity sections below:

Ruby's self-worth appears to be enmeshed with meeting her mother's needs, as her perception of herself is that of her mother's carer. This is reflected in her refusal to attend school, and her association with people younger than she is.

Ruby shared no aspirations as to what she would like for the future, however she shared that should she engage in employment, it would need to be 'something simple' and 'local', to arrange around caring for her mother.

*Ruby, age 15 years. Core Assessment 11.*

Jack was removed from his parent's care and placed in foster care on the day that he was born. As a result of this, he has not had any negative childhood experiences. He is being provided with consistent and good quality care and this should help him to develop and maintain a positive image of himself.

*Jack, age 8 months. Core Assessment 21.*

Within the first example, both Ruby and her mother are constructed as 'different from the norm': Ruby as the carer, her mother as dependent. In the second extract it is implied that Jack's parents are unable to provide him with the *consistent and good quality care* that he requires. This was a common feature throughout the assessment documents with parents seen as 'different' or 'unusual' through their involvement with Children's Services. Here we have examples of when parents are cast as unable to successfully parent their children, failing to provide them with the necessary protective factors to ensure that their children feel loved, and thus perceive themselves as loveable and significant to others (as in Gilligan 2001). Thereby these parents are deemed unable to bestow in their children a sense of self-worth and a positive sense of personal identity. As within the Puritan child discourse (see, for example, Kehily 2004; Armstrong 1983) the 'defective' parents were seen as positioned away from mainstream society and cast as potentially harmful to their children. Further, as made explicit within the second example, parents were seen as culpable if their actions (whether actual or potential) were considered as responsible for causing or likely to cause their children harm (King and Piper 1995; White 1997).

The practitioner's statement *Jack was removed from his parent's care and placed in foster care on the day that he was born. As a result of this, he has not had any negative childhood experiences* may seem overly categorical to those outside social work however the clear implication is that Jack's parents posed such a risk to him that he was removed from their care.

Unsurprisingly, the impact of parental domestic abuse (and particularly parental alcohol and drug misuse) was seen as significant to how a child's identity develops:

That report that I have just done was about the rejection that these children felt by their father. It was secondary to the domestic abuse because the, because that was the norm. Their attachments to their parents were more damaging to them... the domestic abuse is sorted, because they are separated, but their identities aren't because he [father] hasn't been in touch since the separation, yeah, so there's huge issues there for the children.  
*Valerie, social worker.*

I think its really important to um, their relationships with wider family, um, who their parents' friends are I think is quite important as well, um because that'll shape the social circles in what they are going to grow up in, and probably the kinds of social problems they are going to experience if their parents are in drug or alcohol issues. Um, if there's domestic violence, all those kinds of things... the mother will tend to move around and there's a lot of flux, in change of schools, and not really a lot, not a lot of families, of children don't seem to have a big kind of identity from one place, whereas years ago they would have. It's just more fragmented.  
*Lola, social worker.*

Within these examples the practitioners ably articulate the impact that domestic violence and parental social relations are seen to have on a child's identities (see Harold *et al.* 2004; Fraser *et al.* 2009). Within the first extract the practitioner advises that, in her assessment, parental domestic violence was the *norm* for the children. Of greater significance to the child's identities was *the rejection that these children felt by their father*. Thus, for the assessment of the children's identities at least, the practitioner's focus fell not on the physical and psychological risks posed to the children by living in a violent home but rather returns to the notion of attachment as proxy to identities: *their attachments to their parents were more damaging to them*. Likewise, Lola describes how living in chaotic circumstances where *drug or alcohol*

*issues* exist may act to prevent parents from providing children with the consistency and stability they need to develop *a big kind of identity*, leaving children with identities that may be considered *fragmented* (see Lifton 1994). As such, parents who are involved in drug or alcohol misuse or domestic violence can be seen to be failing their children by engaging in activities that prevent them from providing their children with experiences that will nourish a positive sense of self (Home Office 2003).

Further, it was not only the actions of the parents that practitioners focused on but also the inactions of parents. Four<sup>51</sup> identity sections made explicit what the parenting task entailed when considering a child's identity needs. For example:

Robbie now needs care that is responsive to his individual needs to help him gain a sense of self worth and develop a strong sense of self. Robbie needs to know that the care and attention he is given is not dependent on his carer's frame of mind or mood, but on the fact that he needs the care; he will then start to recognize he is worthy of focus and attention and does not need to hyper-activate his behaviour to meet his needs. As he approaches adolescence this issue will become more and more relevant, as this is a period of turmoil for most children, even secure ones, as they seek to disengage somewhat from parental attachments and establish identities of their own. To do this successfully, children need sensitive, contingent care from a stable, secure and predictable carer. In order to provide a care-giving environment that nurtures Robbie's growing and maturing sense of self and identity, Robbie needs his carer to promote and enjoy his growing independence.

*Robbie, age 9. Core Assessment 1.*

**Identity - Parenting Capacity** (*assessing ability to provide basic care, ensuring safety, stimulation, emotional warmth, guidance and boundaries and stability.*)

Due to the levels of instability within the home, Ruby has lacked a secure base from which to develop a sound sense of identity. Her mother appears unaware of this. Her mother will need support in allowing Ruby to develop autonomy and an identity of her own, removed from the needs of her mother. To do this, her mother will need to become emotionally available to Ruby, whilst allowing her the freedom to develop into a healthy young adult.

*Ruby, age 15. Core Assessment 11.*

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<sup>51</sup> This data set consisted of assessments for Robbie and his two siblings and Ruby's assessment. As noted previously, Robbie's and his sibling assessments are identical, with the names of the individual children 'cut and pasted' into the individual assessments.

Interestingly, it appeared to be the omission rather than commission of parenting tasks that practitioners focused upon. For example both extracts above described the lack of consistency afforded to the children. Robbie's identity section notes that he *now needs care that is responsive to his individual needs* implying that to date this had not been the case. Further, Robbie's mother is criticised for providing him care that was *dependent on his carer's frame of mind or mood [and not] on the fact that he needs the care*, whereas Ruby's mother was noted as failing to provide her with a basic child care need: *a secure base* (see White 1998). It is also of note that Ruby's mother is assessed as being *unaware* of Ruby's identity needs and will *require support* to acquire the skills she lacks. As such, what these assessments focus on are unmet needs and concerns about the absence of parenting strengths (see Cooper 2003; Budd 2001). It would appear that, as in Iverson *et al.* (2005), practitioners tended to focus on client problems rather than strengths, their assessments located more in a deficit-based discourse as opposed to the language of potential.

In summary, the assessed poor parenting received by the subject children is seen, unsurprisingly, to have a negative effect upon the children's identities. Thereby I was keen to ascertain if the actions of adults could be seen to have a positive influence on children's identities. To explore this question it was necessary to move away from examining the role of parents in shaping a child's identities to consider the actions of another set of adults in the children's lives: the practitioners and the social work agency.

### **The impact of Children's Services intervention on children's identities**

While practitioners tended to view the influence of parenting on children's identities as negative to varying extents, the discussion so far has also noted that practitioners considered children's identities to be malleable and dynamic. In pursuing this theme in interviews it became apparent that workers believed their own safeguarding actions and those of the social work agency had an impact on children's identities:

I think that it [identity] is definitely dynamic, because it is affected by so many different factors. So a child's identity is going to be affected by coming into foster care, and by, you know, being adopted or by being placed in long-term foster care. By what school they go to, by where they are placed in the country, and by changing relationships with their parents. So it was like when I said that my identity as a child would have been

different depending on my life experiences and that is the same for the children who we work with because they experience so many changes when they suddenly become a looked after child and that then becomes part of their identity; they become looked after, they have a social worker, they have LAC reviews, they go to school in a taxi, and all those things will affect their identity.  
*Rebecca, social worker.*

It's looking at the consistency in the child's life. School, for example, their socialisation with their peers so even if they are changing many placements and I am assessing their identity, I'm trying to look at what's consistent in all of that, trying to get some sort of, um, base for this identity. You know, if a child remained with their, in their birth family their identity would be easier to assess, as it would develop instead of being stopped and started due to changes in their home life.  
*Chantelle, social worker.*

Coherence and continuity are seen as key to the development of a healthy sense of identity (Lifton 1994) and these extracts highlight the need for children to have *consistency* if they are to develop a positive identity. In light of this, Rebecca describes how safeguarding actions can affect how a child perceives his/her identities. Using the example of becoming a looked after child she explains *they experience so many changes when they suddenly become a looked after child*. These changes in a child's life may have a negative impact upon a child's identities which is implicit in Chantelle's suggestion that *if a child remained with their, in their birth family their identity would be easier to assess, as it would develop instead of being stopped and started due to changes in their home life*. However in contrast to how the actions, or inactions, of the child's parents are considered, the impact of the social work agency is meant to be more visible and value-explicit. Whereas it would appear commonplace for parent's weaknesses and failings to be commented upon and judged, the actions of the agency do not become the subject of close moral scrutiny and any negative associations with these actions can be excused as the agency is acting in the child's best interests. Thereby although some actions of the social work agency, for example removing children from their families, necessitates a change in circumstances for the child and can be seen as interrupting the identity affirming context of parent, home and community (if only temporarily) these actions appear excusable because in the wider picture safeguarding the child is paramount.

There is some evidence from research to suggest the relationships between children and their social workers can have a positive impact on the lives of children and their self-perceptions (Dyer and Edomobi 2005; Fraser *et al.* 2009). Studies of the views of looked after young people consistently highlight how much they value sustained support from adults who champion their cause and make them feel cared about (Butler and Williamson 1994b; Munro 2001). Gilligan (1999b, 2000) argues persuasively that this is because having an adult mentor promotes resilience: the ability to survive adversity (as discussed in Chapter Two). Research demonstrates that children who experience such relationships do better than those who do not (Gilligan 2000; Bell 2002; Dearden 2004; Bostock 2004). However the notion that social work practices may have potential negative influences on children's identities can on occasion be noted in the assessment documents. For example the practitioner in the extract below states that being subject to care proceedings and the life decisions these will make for Stephanie may potentially cause her difficulties as she matures. However this is presented as unavoidable, due to the need to safeguard her, and suggestions are made that direct work, as a resource provided by the social work agency, may aid Stephanie's understanding and acceptance of these events:

Because of the somewhat chaotic events that Stephanie has experienced in her life, particularly of late, it is likely that, at the conclusion of these proceedings, she will need one to one work on building up a story of her life, in order to create an inner coherence about what has happened, so that she does not become preoccupied by unresolved childhood issues as she grows older.  
*Stephanie, age 4. Core Assessment 2*

Here the practitioner employs moral rhetorical devices to imply that the actions of the social work agency can be restorative, repairing the damage caused by the *somewhat chaotic events that Stephanie has experienced in her life*. This implies that the social work agency is, and will, act to promote the best interests of Stephanie and can address directly the matter of identity damage. As the reader will note, the practitioner has added a temporal element to the assessment, by talking about Stephanie's future (*as she grows older...*), thereby a clear order, progression and explanation can be observed through which the practitioner makes his/herself accountable by telling a coherent story rather than a contingent one (as in Hall 1997). As such, through the

telling of Stephanie's story the practitioner is using narrative to make sense and account for his/her assessment.

### **Summary**

It is suggested that practitioners' representations of children's identities reveal underlying beliefs about how identities in childhood are to be understood. It is argued that children's identities are constructed in opposition to the identities of an adult. As Prout (2005) observes, an oppositional dichotomy can be identified in that children's identities are cast as less complex and sophisticated than adult identities. In this context, examples have been given as to how the routine exclusion of children's nationality, culture and religion/spiritual beliefs act to provide accounts of children's identities that remain located within the immediate family. Hence, more individual and complicated characteristics of the child as a social and active entity in society are not effectively captured.

Further, practitioners view children's identities as malleable, open to adult shaping and direction. The actions of adults, whether parents or the social workers, are seen to have a strong influence upon a child's development of a healthy sense of self. When the actions, or inactions, of parents are considered, the impact is primarily assessed as negative, having a detrimental affect on the child's identities. Whereas, while it is noted that the actions of the social work agency may threaten a child's sense of consistency and coherence in their life, the actions of the agency are seen to be promoting the best interests of the child and thereby excusable and justified. In conclusion, it can be argued that underlying discursive ideas about children's immaturity, vulnerability and naivety act to reinforce the notion that children are unable to fully articulate and construct identities for themselves thereby leaving this function to adults. As such, adults remain the constructors and definers of children's identities. The following chapter will now consider the views of key adults who may be seen as influential in constructing identities for children - the parents and carers of the subject children.



## Chapter Nine

### ***“And I felt like screaming then, ‘this is my child. This is what he is like.’”* Parent and carers’ narratives about identity**

#### **Introduction**

Whereas previous chapters have focused on social work assessment practice and practitioner conceptualisations of identities, the aim of this chapter is to examine how parents and carers understand ‘identity’ and the assessment of identities. This chapter reveals that for parents and carers, emphasis on the individuality of their child(ren) is what they *want* and anticipate seeing in assessments of their child’s identity. It will also be shown that perceptions held by parents and carers about assessments of a child’s identities were influenced by the extent to which they believed they participated actively in the assessment process and also by their understanding of how much time that practitioners invested in ‘getting to know’ their child. In this respect the practice of assessing identities will be revealed as an intricate process that requires the careful balancing of the views of the parent(s), carer(s) and child, with those of the practitioner.

#### ***“I wasn’t listened to at all”: The exclusion of parental/carer views***

The professional relationship between social workers and parents exists in a complex system of rules and regulations designed to keep children safe (Bundy-Fazioli *et al.* 2008). Often parents mandated to receive court-ordered services are angry and resentful of the intrusion in their lives, which at times results in their being labelled as ‘resistant’, ‘difficult’ and ‘hard to reach’ (O’Hare 1996; Juhila 2003). Further, Diorio (1992) found that parents receiving mandated child welfare services struggled with power imbalances, resulting in overwhelming feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability, and fear. However it should be noted that power is a relational concept, occurring in the context of two or more people and as such, ‘power’ can have multiple meanings (Bundy-Fazioli *et al.* 2008). It is not surprising then that practitioners attempting to work in partnership with parents and carers can encounter numerous difficulties and challenges.

Collins and Evans (2002) argue that in many situations, there are groups of people with experience-based expertise and thereby their input should be seen as both valuable and legitimate. Practitioners’ expertise resides in their knowledge and

experience of helping families. Parental expertise relates to their knowledge and experience of their own particular child. Trevithick (2008) adds to this by advising that the personal knowledge of parents and carers includes more than personal experiences but also the theoretical, factual and personal/practical knowledge that they bring to the encounter. The principle of working in partnership with families has, since the implementation of the Children Act 1989, become foundational in government policy on assessment work (Department of Health 2000). Examining parental involvement in the assessment process, Thoburn *et al.* (1995) developed a hierarchy of participatory practice where ‘partnership’ was seen as the pinnacle of effective practice, followed by ‘participation’, ‘involvement’, ‘consultation’ and ‘keeping informed’, as key processes preceding ‘partnership’. As such there has been a long established trend to make assessment practices more transparent and more inclusive of families. More recently in their analysis of the impact of the Assessment Framework, Cleaver and Walker (2004:95) found parents reporting that ‘at the start of the assessment social workers explained the process and what this would entail’. This supported their claims that parental involvement in assessment had improved since the implementation of the Assessment Framework.

However in this study evidence of parental involvement in practitioner’s assessments of children’s identities was scant, with only one identity section recording parent or carer views. Indeed, on this point we can note from the data (below) the example of Alfie’s mother whose views are offered as if they were her words yet closer reading suggests ‘active voicing’ (Wooffitt 1992) in that the practitioner has employed his/her own phrasing to describe the words of Alfie’s mother (as in Hall 1997). Thereby, the reader of the assessment is being encouraged to believe that the social work assessment is being supported by the views of Alfie’s mother when this may not be the case. Further, the information documented was not a record of the parent’s view of the child’s identities, rather (as discussed in Chapter Six) attachment is invoked as an indicator or proxy for, in this instance, positive identity:

...Alfie’s mother states that he knows who his aunt and uncle are  
and is attached to them as well...

*Alfie, age 2 years. Core Assessment 4.*

This extract from the identity section indicates Alfie's mother's seemingly modest contribution to the assessment process, as well as suggesting that Alfie's identities may be viewed relationally (as noted in Chapter Seven). However this information does not provide an account of how Alfie's mother's views on his identity were gathered. As such, explicit evidence of parent and carer participation in the construction of practitioner accounts of children's identities remains the exception rather than the rule in this data set. Similarly, the following extract from Layla's identity section describes her grandparents' commitment to her and their attempts to support her parents. But this information does not refer to the ways in which Layla's identities may be affected by the involvement of her grandparents:

It is evidenced in the chronology that both sets of grandparents have provided care for Layla in emergency situations. They all feel a deep responsibility for her, also concern over her well-being given her parents long-term substance misuse history, also the subsequent impact of such issues upon Layla's disrupted childhood.

It is recorded in case conference reports that the ongoing involvement and commitment from both maternal and parental grandparents has greatly reduced the impact of disruption on Layla over the last two years.

The local authority has engaged with the family in planning for the care of Layla when it was not deemed appropriate for her parents to care for Layla due to criminal substance misuse activity within the home environment.

*Layla, age 2 years. Core Assessment 31*

Thus it would appear that Layla's grandparents have been actively involved in her care and have worked with the local authority in planning for her future yet their perspectives about her identities do not appear to have been sought, or if sought, were not included in the assessment document. Yet workers in their questionnaire returns (see Chapter Six)<sup>^</sup> indicated that information from parents, carers and children was the most useful in their assessments of children's identities. In contrast, practitioners rated gossip, evidence from court, information from case files, and discussions held during professional meetings (such as Core Groups, Looked After Children reviews, professional/advocate meetings) as least useful in helping them assess children's identities (although as we can note, information from Layla's Child Protection Case Conference had been utilised within her identity section). Thus whilst practitioners stated that the views of parents and carers about children's identities are routinely

sought and are said to be valued by practitioners, these views do not seem to appear in any direct sense within the assessment documents. From the perspective of the parent and carer the perceived omission of their views from a consideration of the child's identities is likely to be perplexing and seen by parents and carers as an example of the powerlessness that can be encountered within the assessment process. Charlie's mother makes this point:

I felt that I wasn't listened to and I don't think Charlie<sup>52</sup> was either. At all, and you know. That totally destroyed me. I wasn't listened to at all.  
*Charlie's mother.*

Here Charlie's mother openly describes her perception of the assessment process as one in which *I wasn't listened to at all*. Further, Charlie's mother states that she likewise feels that Charlie wasn't listened to. This extract is reminiscent of Dingwall (1977) who drew attention to how clients narrate 'atrocious stories' about how they are badly treated either by a specific person or within 'the system' (see also Stimson and Webb 1975) and may stem from, in this instance, the mother's dissatisfaction with Children's Services as a whole. Alternatively, it may be that the views of Charlie's mother have been excluded due to their being perceived by the worker as unreliable thereby constructing Charlie's mother as a dubious witness rather than being seen as 'trusted teller of the tale' (Smith 1993 in Hall 1997). The following section now explores further this aspect of user participation, particularly the ways in which parents understand the assessment of their children's identities and their role in this process.

***"I'm a bit confused really, identity and all that business, what do they mean?"***  
**Parent/Carers understandings of identity**

Hawkins *et al.* (2001:2-3) argue for increased practitioner awareness of their use of language in practice, advising that language *is* practice:

[L]anguage is [the] main vehicle for communicating what we do... [B]eing aware of the terminology we choose, and the way in which we use it can be critical in determining whose view of reality we are accepting, what power relations we wish to

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<sup>52</sup> Charlie, age 14 years. Core Assessment 28.

reinforce, the sort of worlds we wish to adopt, and in identifying the type of social work we wish to create.

In essence, the phrasing and the words workers choose will to a significant degree shape the meanings and actions that make sense of practice. Identity is a construct that imbues many meanings for different people and in interviews the parents and carers were asked if practitioners explained to them the areas that they would be considering when assessing the identities of the children. Four respondents felt that practitioners had sufficiently explained to them what an assessment of the child's identities would entail; one respondent was not clear if this had been explained by the social worker and eight respondents stated that the assessment of identity had not been explained to them. This problematises how parents and carers understand and are encouraged to participate in the process of assessing identities, as the following extracts demonstrate:

She [the social worker] said something about identity but I haven't really, like, seen her that much so I'm not really sure.

*Jack's<sup>53</sup> mother.*

To be honest with you she [the social worker] never mentioned anything about identity at all. There was none of that what so ever. It was a case of she came in and said that she was assessing myself and my wife and we just, being completely new to all this, we just sat there and went 'ok'.

*Charlie's father.*

Identity was never really highlighted. Their needs were more, um, prevalent. You know, that one thing, their needs we did discuss that part of it. Their health, the education side of it because obviously Harry was going to nursery at the time, so there was a lot of input there, but um, no, their identity was never really discussed.

*Harry and Megan's<sup>54</sup> grandmother.*

From these extracts parent and carer participation within the assessment process comes into focus with their accounts implicating a sense of professional dominance (see Anward 1997; Peräkylä 2006). Despite being a key stakeholder within the assessment process Jack's mother states *I haven't really, like, seen her [the social worker] that much* whereas Charlie's father describes some inactivity in that *we just sat there and went 'ok'*. Both these extracts suggest some notable contrast between the

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<sup>53</sup> Jack, age 8 months. Core Assessment 21.

<sup>54</sup> Harry, age 3 years and Megan, age 8 months. Core Assessment 24 (combined assessment).

parents as passive. However, Harry and Megan's grandmother provides an account of her engagement within the assessment process that seems more inclusive, explaining that discussions did take place with the social worker regarding the children's *needs* although a discussion of the children's identities was not recalled. As such, it would appear that practitioners do not appear to be consistently advising parents and carers as to what their assessment of the children's identities will include. As such, I was interested to learn how parents and carers conceived of their children's identities and how these mapped across those constructed by practitioners.

Previous chapters have highlighted how practitioners perceive children's identities as fluid, incremental and relational. Practitioners appear to construct children's identities in assessments through a complex and iterative process of engagement and elucidation whereby all manner of personal, familial and environmental attributes are scrutinised in order to categorise an 'identity'. Cleaver and Freeman (1995) in their study of parental perspectives of suspected child abuse make the observation that people see and interpret things in different ways, concluding that if social workers and parents can agree to see events/phenomenon in the same way then better outcomes for children are likely to be promoted (see also Parton and O'Byrne 2000). Therefore some consensus within parental, carer, and practitioner constructions of children's identities may potentially aid the promotion of positive outcomes for children.

In interview parents and carers were asked *what do you understand by the term identity?* Their responses revealed notable differences between parent or carer and those of the practitioner. As Thierry and Robbie's carer explained:

I'm a bit confused really, identity and all that business, what do they mean? You see the boys [Thierry and Robbie] are different. They've got their own different ways and that and that's what I call their identity, you know. Quirks in his [Thierry] personality; like he gets hiccups all the time. But stuff like that wasn't included, you know, they [social workers] don't seem to be interested in knowing about that stuff. *Grandfather of Thierry, Robbie and Stephanie.*<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Robbie, age 9. Core Assessment 1; Thierry, age 11. Core Assessment 19; Stephanie, age 4. Core Assessment 2. Robbie, Thierry and Stephanie are siblings, subject to separate assessments. Thierry and Robbie reside with their grandfather: Stephanie with their grandmother.

In the above extract, Thierry and Robbie's carer explains his understanding of identity focusing on the individuality of the children and emphasising *their own different ways and quirks in his personality*. As the children's grandparent explains, *they [social workers] don't seem to be interested in knowing about that stuff* indicating his awareness about the difference between the way he views the boy's identities and his perception of practitioner interests. However, as has been observed in Chapter Six, practitioners do report an interest in learning about the mundane and intimate details of a child's life, but do not commonly report these details within the assessment reports. As such the distinction between lay and professional interests may not be as pronounced as this grandfather believes. Rather it may be the case as proposed by Scourfield and Pithouse (2006 334) that 'it is routine for practitioners to simultaneously draw on lay and professional sources for their knowledge-in-practice'. Thereby, the omission of the mundane and intimate within the assessment documents does not necessarily imply that practitioners do not place value this knowledge (as discussed below).

Thierry and Robbie's carer was not alone in holding a belief that identity constitutes, at least in part, a focus on the child's essential individuality, as the following responses to the above question reveal:

Who he is and what sort of boy he is... *Jack's mother*.

Their personality, their character, um, if they know themselves.  
*Harry and Megan's mother*.

Well it's about Nathaniel, isn't it? The stuff that makes Nathaniel 'Nathaniel'. *Nathaniel's father*.

Where they came from. Who they belong to. Where they are living. Um, their environment. Everything, you know, to do with their personal requirements. What they are like as individuals.  
*Harry and Megan's grandmother*.

As the above extracts suggest, the parents and carers of the subject children considered their identities to focus upon the individuality, personality and character of the specific child. As Nathaniel's father aptly observes, Nathaniel's identity includes *the stuff that makes Nathaniel 'Nathaniel'*. This emphasis on the intimate and unique details of the child's personality and character was shown in Chapter Six to be part of

practitioners' understanding of a child's identities. However, practitioners tend not to use fine-grained intimate details (such as Thierry hiccups) within their accounts of children's identities. Rather, reflecting Collins and Evans (2002), what appears in the identity sections are rhetorical devices employed to demonstrate practitioner expertise and experience of knowing how to help families, rather than accounts of parent or carer expertise about *knowing* their own particular child.

As such, it appeared that practitioners employ a more selective and mundane knowledge of the intimate details of a child's personality and character as a basis *upon* which to form their assessment. Thus it would appear that rather than practitioners failing to recognise the importance of individuality within their assessments of children's identities, knowledge of the intimate becomes subsumed within standardised accounts of children and childhoods<sup>56</sup> that discursively reinforce the need for adults to take responsibility for children (as discussed in Chapter Eight). This difference in how parents, carers, and practitioners construct children's identities may be subtle yet introduces the possibility for distrust to occur, for if parents and carers do not perceive practitioners to *know* the child as they do it may be very difficult for them to have faith in the practitioner's assessment of the child and his/her individual needs and ways to meet these.

***“Well he’s certainly got a negative identity hasn’t he? Bless him!” Parent/carers views on the representation of their child(ren)***

Parents and carers were asked to consider if they felt that the identity sections adequately captured their children:

If we'd of never seen this [identity section] before the only thing that possibly could of snagged me big time would have been 'he's aware of his musical abilities'. Yeah. 'Bullying'? How many kids experience bullying? 'Lacks confidence in his educational abilities'? He wasn't interested because the school didn't want to know him and he didn't want to know the school. How many other kids are like that, yeah? So it's like nothing. 'Feels accepted in his foster placement'. It's a new experience, a new place, it's like a holiday sort of thing to him at the time so you know, so there's very little there.  
*Charlie's father.*

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<sup>56</sup> This phenomenon is discussed further in Chapter Eleven.



I would've said, you know, 'no'. It was too brief; it was too textbook wasn't it? You know, not really about him [Harry] as an individual. It was more about a basic set of needs. You know, there wasn't anything about what he had gone through, how that might of affected him or how sensitive he was, because he was rattling and he was in bits.

*Harry's grandmother.*

These extracts raise again the issue of recognising the child's individuality. Within the extract the father appreciates the practitioner's inclusion of Charlie's musical ability within the section, but appears concerned about the other non-specific details, for example, Charlie's experience of bullying and his schooling, both of which his father view as not untypical of other young people....*many other kids are like that, yeah?* Similarly, Harry's grandmother states that in her opinion Harry's identity section *was too textbook... not really about him [Harry] as an individual. It was more about a basic set of needs.* Understandably, it would appear that parents or carers want, and expect, practitioners' accounts of their children's identities to represent the uniqueness and individuality of their child. Hence to present the child's identities as *a basic set of needs* is contrary to what parents and carers want and anticipate. As the following extracts highlight, parent and carers wish to see more individualised accounts of their child within the assessments, regardless of whether these accounts are positive (such as Charlie's musical abilities) or, as in the extract below, less complimentary (such as Thierry's propensity to *run away* and *show off*):

I'm pretty sure nothing in that [identity section] would've made me think definitely 'yes that's Thierry'... If they'd had said the facts, you know. Like he runs away, wherever he goes he shows off, then I would say 'yeah, that's Thierry that is'.... I wouldn't recognise them two [Thierry and Robbie] from those [identity sections]. And the boys aren't similar you know, they are completely different<sup>57</sup>. Chalk and cheese they are to be honest. But the woman next door she sees them and sees the difference in them and she said that they are a credit, the way that they behave and speak to people. So that was nice: that's a big compliment that.

*Grandfather of Thierry and Robbie.*

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<sup>57</sup> As previously highlighted, Thierry and Robbie's identity sections were almost identical being 'cut and pasted' into the relevant assessment.

As such, it is not simply the positive aspects of a child's identities that parents and carers wish to be included within their children's identities sections, but rather the *facts* about the child, such as Thierry's propensity to *run away* and *show off* that parents and carers place value upon. Whereas James (1993) demonstrates how professional construction of children's identities that were deemed negative by parents were rejected by parents who worked hard to achieve alternative categorical identities for them, when it comes to the assessments of children's identities in this sample it is the authenticity rather than the complementariness that is of importance to them. However, Thierry and Robbie's mother held another view, especially in terms of the assessment of Robbie's identities:

Oh yeah I'd definitely, I'd definitely recognise him [Robbie]  
from it [identity section]. Yeah.  
*Robbie's mother.*

It is the individuation of the assessments that appears important to parents and carers and not necessarily whether the accounts show their children in a good light. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that Robbie's mother appears satisfied with the assessment of his identities whereas his grandfather and carer feel differently. The reasons for this may be manifold. As a non-resident parent, Robbie and Thierry's mother may feel disempowered or may lack confidence in challenging the assessments but may also wish to seek approval and display herself as a morally adequate parent by acclaiming agreement with the practitioner. Likewise, it is possible that Robbie's identity section reflect more his identities when formerly at home in the care of his mother than recognising the *improvements* made since residing with his grandfather. Thus when undertaking assessments of children's identities workers need to consider a complex amalgam of the child's subjectivity within a shifting temporal context with its own cultural specificity (Ferguson 2004).

Practitioners reported utilising different perspectives about a child's identities as an essential assessment strategy (see Chapter Six) that can capture the diversity of a child's identities. Hence practitioners state they routinely seek the views of parents and carers about the subject child in the assessment process. However, some parents and carers shared a less positive view about their participation in this process and this may affect how they appraise the practitioner's assessments of their child's identities.

The following extracts are from interviews with parents who reported that their views of their children's identities were not sought:

Well he's [Steve-o]<sup>58</sup> certainly got a negative identity hasn't he? Bless him! ... I think that to an outsider reading this, I would think 'oh, poor kid!' It's just so negative. And you know, he is an amazing character. He is um, I don't like to categorise because we shouldn't, but he will be one of life's eccentrics. You know, as long as he is happy, really what goes on around him goes right over his head. He can be an absolute treasure but on the side he can be so obsessed with something, it's actually frightening because nothing else, you know, he's got to do it! But that doesn't come through in the assessment, that part of his identity isn't included.

*Steve-o's mother.*

Charlie's father: Most of the reports that we read were mainly about myself and my wife. And they really were. And you get 'this is my professional opinion of these people...' Charlie was mentioned in there because they'd picked up some details from Charlie but it was more like an interview thing than personal opinions yeah? Um, and I really couldn't say that there was one big section dedicated to Charlie. They had things in there about what he needs, what they would like to do in the long-term, things like that, but there was not a, sort of like, 'this is Charlie'. There was none of that at all ... and these reports are going to court so it's a thing of, you know. The magistrates should get to know the kids. Yeah, so there should be 'This is Charlie, he's such and such a kid', you know? There was none of that at all.

Charlie's mother: And I felt like screaming then, 'this is my child. This is what he is like'.

Charlie's father: It was a very professional sort of thing, you know? It was very cold.

*Charlie's mother and father.*

These extracts emphasise the different ways in which practitioners, parents and carers understand children's identities. Steve-o's mother shares her belief that an important part of his identity, his obsessive behaviour, appears excluded from the assessment. Charlie's parents express concern that the assessment focused on *what he needs* and the local authority's planning for Charlie without including an account of *this is Charlie, he's such and such a kid*. Here again, the differences in how we perceive another's identities is brought to the fore, as well as the selective inclusion of the

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<sup>58</sup> Steve-o, age 10 years. Core Assessment 15.

more generic aspects of identities by practitioners rather than more individuated accounts.

Parents and carers appear to want the individuality of their child to show through in the assessment, and appear unsatisfied by assessments that only include selective elements of a child's personality or focus only on the child's needs. Notably, Charlie's parents highlight these differences as rooted in a lay and professional divide (Beresford 1999). They acknowledge the assessment has been prepared to aid the court in making their decision about Charlie's future and as such, they felt that the court *should get to know the kids* (see below). However they felt that the assessment did not advise the court about Charlie's identities adequately and they viewed the assessment to be *a very professional sort of thing, you know? It was very cold*. Here the perceived lack of emotional warmth and detachment of the practitioner, as a professional, is counter-posed with the sensitivity of ordinary people, such as Charlie's parents to provide a powerful rhetorical inference (see also Spencer 1994). It would thus appear that by excluding more nuanced and domestic details of a child's life and personality this both fails to enhance the assessment and may also cause parents to doubt how well practitioners *know* their children, leading them to doubt the adequacy of the assessment.

***“She don’t know him as well as we do”*: Factors influencing how parent/carers view practitioner’s knowledge of the child**

How practitioners manage their interactions with parents, carers and other lay individuals is important, not only for reaching resolution in a case, but also in delineating their own professional identity. As Macdonald (2006:365) notes ‘knowledge and expertise can be warranted by diplomas, certificates, and degrees, but trust is no less important and will be accorded to those whose outwards appearance and manner fits with accepted notions of repute and respectability’. The efforts of workers to construct, present, and defend a favourable identity in their own eyes and in the eyes of others animate what Hughes called ‘the social drama of work’ (Hughes [1951] 1984). Goffman (1959) elaborated the dramaturgical metaphor by using the language of theatre to describe how people stage self-presentations and respond to others performances. His dramaturgical approach helps illuminate how the activities of workers shape the impressions others hold of them in ways that bolster their own

importance and counter alternative interpretations of what their work implies about their identities. As such, we can begin to understand how social work practice constructs identities not only for client but also for the practitioner.

It appears that parents and carers want practitioner assessments of their children's identities to demonstrate enough details of the child's individuality to authentically represent their child. In order to do this effectively, parents and carers expect practitioners to really *know* their children. Given that a third of parents and carers did not report active participation within the assessment process we might conceive that parents and carers accept that practitioners will make their own assessment of the child's identities, through their day-to-day interactions with the child, often not when parents and carers are present (as in Nikander 2003, see also Chapter Four). Therefore, it was necessary to explore in more depth the different ways in which parents or carers might hold different views about how well practitioners *know* their children, or not:

Well to be honest with you, [the social worker] doesn't know what the hell she's on about... she's young, and when I first met her she was really young and a student, and well I didn't like her. She don't know him [Jack] as well as we do, you know... but she thinks she knows him. But not the way that we see him, like, I can imagine him now running around, he loves messing around with the TV. I, I'm not being rude or anything but I don't think she knows him as well as us. I can picture him here now running around, you know.

*Jack's mother.*

I don't think she [the social worker] had as much time with Megan as she did with Harry, so I think she got to know her very much on the surface, I would say. I don't think she'd be able to say that she'd really got to know her because she's not the child that [the social worker] thought she was. *Harry and Megan's grandmother.*

Both these extracts from interviews provide examples of family members challenging the adequacy of assessments. The emphasis on the practitioner's personal traits and professional authority which can be noted in the interview with Jack's mother, can be seen as an attempt to discredit the credibility of the worker and by extension the assessment. Their comments may also act to cast doubt on the worthiness of an agency which allows such 'unsuitable' workers to act as its representatives (see

Taylor and White 2000) and which seemingly endorses *surface* level assessments, as within the second extract. Also within these extracts it is implied that the child(ren) hold some distinctive identity (Saraga 1998), rather than a multiplicity of identities as assumed by a constructionist viewpoint (for example, Hall 1990, 1992), and it is this *particular* identity about which practitioners are deemed to lack sufficient knowledge. Thus, Jack's mother is clear in distinguishing the level of knowledge she holds about Jack's identities as more authentic than that held by the practitioner making it clear that although the worker may believe that she knows Jack: *I don't think she knows him as well as us*. Although not explaining why this is so, for Jack's mother it appears that relatedness and a close degree of emotional connectedness is necessary to *know* a child. Relationship difficulties between a parent and practitioner may affect the former's perception of the latter's performance with regard to capturing the essential character of the child, as seems likely in the extract regarding Jack. By contrast, Harry and Megan's grandmother attributes a perceived *surface* knowledge in the assessment of Megan's identities due to the practitioner not spending *as much time with Megan as she did with Harry*. The extracts suggest that for these parents and carers, identity has something of an essentialist quality that can only be gleaned over time, proximity and closeness.

It would appear that parents and carers invoke a temporal and spatial dimension in order to gauge how well practitioners *know* their children:

She [the social worker] don't know him [Harry], because she never really used to, she was never really around. There was always someone else doing it. She was never around when we were having the visits, when Harry was having his transport and that. She was never around.

*Harry and Megan's mother.*

I don't think she [the social worker] got to know him [Charlie], not very well. Because he was placed miles away and she's in Dockside. Social workers do have cases and she can only allocate a certain amount of time so that's going to come into it, and I don't think she had that much time with him at all to get to know him.

*Charlie's father.*

*Chester and Billie's grandfather:* Oh yeah she [the social worker] got to know them [Chester and Billie<sup>59</sup>] very well.

*Chester and Billie's grandmother:* Yeah I thought she did get to know them very well.

*Researcher:* So how did she get to know them? What did she do?

*Chester and Billie's grandfather:* Well if she, sometimes she would come here with another social worker and when the other social worker was here talking to us, she would go upstairs to the bedrooms with the kids and play with them for about an hour. Or sometimes she would sit down here and talk to the kids, but she would never ignore them if the kids were talking to her. They would sit on her lap and draw for her. Yes she was very good.

*Chester and Billie's grandmother:* And she used to take them down the centre twice a week to see their mother.

*Chester and Billie's grandfather:* And the kids bonded with her. They still know her quite well now.

*Chester and Billie's grandparents/carers.*

As Charlie's father acknowledges, practitioners have to allocate time across cases and may not be able to spend enough time with children, such as those like Charlie who are placed out of county, than they would wish. However what seems evident is that parents and carers want practitioners to invest their time in getting to know the children, with such investments being valued, as is clear in the extract from Chester and Billie's grandparents. As was observed in Chapter Six, and in part reflected by Harry and Megan's mother above, the more 'informal' routine tasks of practitioners, such as transportation to and from a place of contact, are seen as key practices that enable practitioners to share space and time with children, thereby learning better the ordinary but intimate details of their day-to-day lives and identities. Intimacy, inter-subjectivity and closeness with others are seen as essential components in how we learn about ourselves and others (McAdams 1993), however high caseloads and competing demands reduce the amount of time practitioners can allocate a child and thereby severely limit what can be known about them (Ferguson 2004). As such, it may be the institutional contexts in which practitioners operate and not the personal traits of workers that may be the greatest barrier to practitioners *knowing* children as their parents and carers would wish.

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<sup>59</sup> Chester, age 4 years and Billie, age 3. Core Assessment 26 (combined assessment).

As well as the amount of time that practitioners spend with children, how much the practitioners write about the children's identities also appears as a factor in the way some parents and carers perceive the adequacy of an assessment:

You know it's [the identity section] all supposed to be about Charlie and [the social worker] should have had a lot of experience in working out an identity for a child yeah? One page! Yeah, there should have been a lot more. It could have been at least 10 pages, easily 10 pages. One page isn't even like a CV yeah?

*Charlie's father.*

Another parent stated that time and some degree of relatedness or intimacy was essential to know a child and that this would in turn lead to a lengthy assessment. Thus, length of assessment was equated with knowledge and by extension, adequacy:

For her [the social worker] to have been there through everything and got to have known him [Harry] and then she would've done pages and pages about him because she would've known what he was like in all different areas and aspects.

*Harry and Megan's mother.*

As we shall see below, practitioners work under rigorous guidelines as to what to include in their assessments and how long an assessment should be, however what we can see from the views of parents and carers is that some would like to see more written about the identities of their child. As Harry and Megan's mother explains, the more a practitioner writes in their assessments about a child's identities the more people can learn *what he [Harry] was like in all different areas and aspects*. It would thus appear that parents and carers are making the common-sense observation that in order to represent the multi-faceted nature of a child's identities, practitioners need to consider the child in a range of settings, increasing the amount of time and breath of content that undertaking an assessment of a child's identities entails (as in Holland 2004).

In this chapter we begin to understand what comprises lay conceptions of children's identities. It is about particularity, contexts, time and intimacy. In the context of the Core Assessment a key function of the identity section is that of summarising *who the child is*. It addresses this point more than the other sections of the assessment. In this



sense, for parents and carers the identity section lies at the heart of the assessment process.

***“I mean it’s really about who the assessment is for...”: The multiple audiences of assessment***

The influence of the intended audience on the form and content of official records, such as social work assessments, is an area much explored within social work research (see for example, Kagle 1990, 1993; Prince 1996; Pithouse 1998; Askeland and Payne 1999; Taylor 2008b; White *et al* 2009). Garfinkel (1974) wrote of case file records being only read by personnel inside the organisation who carry assumptions about what they read – assumptions which would not be understood or shared by ‘outsiders’. Whereas Scott (1990:34) suggests that the intended content of any document (what the author means) is not necessarily the same as its received content by another readership. Thereby, even if the author takes for granted a certain interpretation of the document, the audience may not share this understanding (Evans and Harris 2004). Thus the ‘tellability’ (Shuman 1986) of the assessment is of particular relevance as frequently the audience will not have met the subject child, such as the court, and therefore the representation of the child within the assessment will be a prime source for how the audience gets to *know* the child (see Holland 2001).

Social work texts constitute performance when, for example, a Judge reads a court report, or members of a Child Protection Case Conference consider a social worker’s recommendations, or a researcher analyses an interview. Performance means reading for a purpose and from a position (Hall 1997:24). As Smith (1980: 219) concludes:

No narrative version can be independent of a particular teller and occasion of telling and therefore, we may assume that every narrative version has been constructed in accord with some set of purposes or interests.

Practitioners work from complex guidelines as to what to include in their assessments and how long an assessment should be. These guidelines have both explicit and tacit meanings, having evolved not only from the formal practice guidance (National Assembly for Wales 2001b) accompanying the Assessment Framework but also from the day-to-day occupational world in which practitioners operate (Blaug 1995; Parton

1998). Interestingly, this latter point was rarely raised by practitioners in interview but more so by parents and carers as I discuss below.

The external audience of the assessment most commonly noted by parent/carers was the court, as Chester and Billie's grandparents explain:

*Chester and Billie's grandfather:* I mean it's really about who the assessment is for really, because we don't need to know because they're our grandkids and we know them already. I mean if someone wanted to write about what we know about the children they would have to write a lot more than that wouldn't they?

*Researcher:* And you make an interesting point there about this assessment not being for you but for someone else.

*Chester and Billie's grandmother:* It's for the court.

*Chester and Billie's grandfather:* Yeah it's for the court so I mean they are not going to write a full book on us...

*Chester and Billie's grandmother:* Well the Judges don't want them to. They'll turn around and say 'you've written too much, we don't need to know that'. The Judge said that to [the social worker], he told her he didn't need to know everything; he only needed to know that...Funnily enough when we went to the final hearing for the kids the Judge actually turned to one of the lawyers and said 'what are you giving me this for? A forty page document on the kids, I don't need this!' And he threw it back at them. He said 'do me a one page, a page will do me'. He said 'all I want to know is a little bit of background on the kids. I don't need to know...' and this is what he said, 'the ins and outs of a cat's arse' didn't he? And he really got annoyed with the social worker for writing their report. They had two big documents, yeah, and he said 'all I need is one page to say who they are, ages, and how they settled. I don't need to know anything else.

*Researcher:* That is very interesting isn't it?

*Chester and Billie's grandfather:* Well have you seen the dossier that they gave on our kids? There is one, because it goes through Lisa [Chester and Billie's mother], everything. It's about forty-fifty pages! And there's one on Chester and one on Billie almost exactly the same. All that paperwork, isn't it? They could just of done a couple of pages and had the job done. You know, and they're only babies after all. If they were adults you could say a bit more, but kids change from day to day. You could write down 'oh they're happy here' and come round next week and they might want to go home, you know.

Here, Chester and Billie's grandparents report their first-hand experience of the court system. They invoke a different view of how assessment is made adequate and

accessible by referring to the Judge's view that *all I need is one page to say who they are, ages, and how they settled. I don't need to know anything else*. The grandparents employ the rhetorical device of reported speech, or active voicing (Wooffitt 1992) to lend authority to their version of events, and provide a useful reminder of an inherent difficulty with reported speech. As Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998:225) note people may report talk 'when in fact it is unlikely, or in some cases impossible, that the words so reported were actually said in that way.' In this instance it would appear rather unlikely that a Judge would employ the term *ins and outs of a cat's arse* within his/her conduct of a case. However, the grandparents are making the point that, on occasions, social work assessments are regulated by the judiciary. As White (1998:274) notes:

[B]ecause they [the judiciary] *always and necessarily* hold the final say in weighing different opinions and then incorporating them into *judgements* (transforming them into facts) judges are likely to select the evidence which appears *forensically* most rigorous... (Emphasis original).

How the judiciary makes sense of the multiple realities placed in front of them has been subject to theoretical analysis. Bourdieu (1986) offers an examination of the judicial employment of the rhetorical processes of universality and objectivity in constructing statements as 'facts', whereas Luhmann (1988) identified reductionism within legal discourses, which ultimately enables the judiciary to construct judgements from the binary oppositions of right/wrong and legal/illegal. Certainly the reported speech of the Judge, above, implies a focus on universality, objectivity and reductionism and if the court is clearly indicating that these are the features of assessments which they seek, it is perhaps unsurprising that these ideas have been disseminated into practice, resulting in standardised rather than individualised assessments of children's identities.

Further, Chester and Billie's grandparents are clear in stating that they understood the assessment not to be for them. As they state, *we know them already. I mean if someone wanted to write about what we know about the children they would have to write a lot more than that wouldn't they?* Within this statement the purpose of the assessment is seen to be advising the court and, as above, the amount written about the children is equated directly to what the court *wants* to know about the children. It

is noteworthy that the assessment in question was prepared as part of the local authority's application for care of the children and it appears clear that the audience of the assessment is seen first and foremost as the court. Thus the court is seen as influencing the assessment content and how the assessment is presented. As Goffman (1959) observed, people do not simply tell their story but take a position vis-à-vis their audience and enact their narrative. The above extract suggests that a lengthy consideration of the child's identities is not what the court *wants* or *expects* from practitioners and this may explain why practitioners' assessments of children's identities tend to be somewhat curtailed.

Within the above account from Chester and Billie's grandparents we can see how they perceive children's identities. As the grandfather explains *they [social workers] could just of done a couple of pages and had the job done. You know, and they're only babies after all. If they were adults you could say a bit more, but kids change from day to day.* From this statement we may infer that the grandparents hold an incremental idea about identities, with identities seen as becoming more complex and developed as a person grows to adulthood (such as in Lacan 1936; Erikson 1963, 1968). There is also recognition of the complexities that assessing children's identities may entail. For example, the grandparents acknowledge that children *change from day to day*, which stands in some contrast to the views of parents and carers discussed earlier, in which a 'true', essential version of the child's self was implied. As such, there are instances when parents and carers hold similar views to workers as to the ways in childhood identities are to be understood.

Some parents and carers' spoke of hidden agendas in the way assessments were structured in order to achieve some disguised aim. Harry and Megan's grandmother suggests in the extract below that the local authority plan for the child had shaped how the child was represented within the assessments in order to win some organisational advantage rather than reveal the full needs and identity of the child.

*Harry and Megan's grandmother:* Oh I think she [the social worker] knows Harry very, very well, um. She's had an awful lot to do with Harry, from an early stage, but I don't think that she was that interested in portraying his needs, extra needs, because had she, he wouldn't have been as easy to adopt. And that was her ultimate aim; that was her goal. I don't know if she wanted to

leave with a, you know, a thumbs up, and, you know. I don't know what her reason was, but that was her, she was hell bent on it from day one. I know she was.

*Researcher:* So the report, you think, has been written for the purpose...

*Harry and Megan's grandmother:* Of adoption, yeah. I have always said that. It was the first thing I said to my solicitors when we got it...

*Researcher:* Now when you were saying that you felt that Harry's assessment had been written to make him more appealing, do you think that's true of Megan?

*Harry and Megan's grandmother:* Just that one paragraph that 'she recognises and loves to see her brother'. You know, that can't be true for an eight month old who had no previous attachment, no previous recognition. She was far too young to be able to anyway, you know, I find that totally inaccurate. But it looks good. And at least they can adopt them together if they get on!

*Researcher:* And that's the strongest theme that comes out of this interview, isn't it, that you feel the assessments...

*Harry and Megan's grandmother:* They're coloured. They've been written with an agenda, because Harry's needs and Harry's identity goes a lot deeper than that, you know? He had a troubled few years, you know, he really has and I don't think that it [the assessment] gives his identity any credit and his needs have been simplified so that he can be adopted.

Here, Harry and Megan's grandmother explains why she feels the children's assessments were *written with an agenda*: to support the local authority's care plan to seek alternative carers for the children. As the grandmother notes, although she believes that the practitioner knew Harry *very, very well* the practitioner appeared to her to be *hell bent* on achieving the local authority's aim, being prepared to frame the assessment to win approval from the court by making less prominent the complexities of the children's circumstances and needs (see Vojak 2009). Similarly, when considering the content of Billie's identity section, her grandparents also highlighted the way information in the assessment was constructed to achieve a particular purpose:

*Chester and Billie's grandmother:* Every so often she [Billie] will come out with 'I'm going back to live with my Mum.

*Chester and Billie's grandfather:* And that wasn't right be in there [the assessment], because it says there 'she seems content' and that. Well she wasn't content for months and months, and they wrote that and I don't know where they got that from because she wasn't content in staying here. ✕

*Chester and Billie's grandmother:* Oh no, she wanted to be with her mother constantly.

*Chester and Billie's grandfather:* She wanted to be with her mother. She was asking and crying for her mother everyday. So that's not right where they [social workers] say that she was content.

*Chester and Billie's grandmother:* She is now mind.

*Chester and Billie's grandfather:* But she wasn't when this was written so whether that was written for the courts so that we could keep the kids, I don't know.

Here again the authenticity of the assessment's claims about the child is questioned. As within the previous extract it is suggested that the needs of the children have been over-simplified to secure the local authority's aims. This not only highlights the complex nature of assessments but also raises the possibility that if assessments of identities are inherently subjective and if identity is fluid and dynamic, it may be that this assessment dimension is more susceptible to presentational strategies than other areas of assessment. As Garfinkel (1967) suggests, official records such as assessments, can be seen as an important means of self-defence for front-line workers and certainly the identity section is the practitioners' main tool in providing the reader with an account of who the child *is*. The apparent preference of practitioners to selectively mediate the 'facts' in cases (as discussed in Chapter Six) may also lend support to this observation.

Practitioners of course recognised that if an assessment was to be presented to court this did influence how it would be presented. As suggested by Cuff (1980:32), situations such as court involve a 'principled position of doubt', with practitioners *expecting* their assessments to be scrutinised within the court arena. But most practitioners stated they would be more guarded and keen to justify their claims rather than manipulate them. As one practitioner explains:

They [assessments] are more flexible out of court. I'm always aware in the court assessments, you know, that I've got to be very factual, yeah? And I could be cross-examined on anything, you know, so I, I'm very careful when I write assessments for court. And, um, I know I've struggled on them and have had to get assistance from a manager because of the issue of 'well can I say that?' you know? 'My analysis is...however it is not backed-up by...' So, you know, it's difficult. So I think a lot of it, I'm more free flowing with assessments out of court than I am when they are in the court arena. And perhaps that's an issue for social

workers as a whole but I'm, I'm aware that I am very guarded, yeah? When I'm doing them for court and you know, I say what is in front of me but analysis-wise, you've got to be very, very careful, haven't you? So that does stunt my assessment, you know. *Valerie, social worker.*

Valerie clearly distinguishes between careful assessments for the court and those that are internal only and more *free flowing* (see also, Holland 2004). She claims being *careful* in her choice of information within assessments for the court, with this caution appearing to be rooted in the fear of cross-examination (Cuff 1980). This poses the question of quality control in assessments and whether families outside the court arena are receiving the same standard of assessment service compared with those families who come before the court.

### **Summary**

Within this chapter parents and carers' perceptions of their involvement in practitioner assessments of their child's identities have been considered alongside parent and carer appraisals of these assessments. Despite the formal guidance on parental participation in assessments and the findings from practitioner post-interview questionnaires (which indicated that practitioners considered information from parents, carers and children as pivotal to their assessments of children's identities) explicit evidence of active parental involvement in the assessment of children's identities appeared to be scant. This apparent lack of parental participation is further evidenced by practitioners not appearing to consistently advise parents and carers as to what their assessment of the child(ren)'s identities will include. This in turn makes it problematic for parents and carers to understand and appraise practitioners' assessments of their children's identities.

It was noted that parents and carers considered their child(ren)'s identities as self-evidently grasped through an emphasis upon their individuality, personality and character. Whereas workers selectively and necessarily completed their assessment to serve a number of purposes, which to varying extents impede the capture of some 'authentic' identity, that parents might assume to be the aim of the child's assessment. This difference in how parents, carers, and practitioners construct children's identities introduces the possibility for conflict to occur, for if parents and carers do not

perceive practitioners to *know* the child it may be difficult for them to have confidence in the assessment of the child and his/her individual needs.

Parents and carers seemed to connote time spent by the practitioner with the child to how well practitioners *knew* their children. As well as the amount of time that practitioners spent with children, how much the practitioners wrote about the children's identities within assessments also appeared as an important factor in the way parents and carers viewed the assessment as adequate or not. However the content and length of assessments was seen to be subject to external factors. It was noted that assessments of identities, especially those penned for the court, could be susceptible to agendas that were not made clear to families. Yet, parents and carers were not oblivious to the possibility that assessments might be fashioned to further the local authority's care plan for the child. As such, the content and purpose of an assessment can be seen to be both contingent and contested in its potential to 'speak' authentically about the child in question.



## **Chapter Ten**

### ***“My identity is about all the things that make me special”***

#### **Children’s constructions of their own identities**

#### **Introduction**

Following on from the previous chapter, which focused on the perspectives held by parents and carers about the ways in which their children’s identities were constructed within assessments, this chapter presents key findings from the subject children themselves and contrasts these with relevant sections in assessments and with practitioners’ interview accounts about their approach to assessing children’s identities. By inviting children to undertake exercises devised to aid the children’s expression of their identities<sup>60</sup> this chapter will demonstrate how practitioners and children appear to hold discrepant views as to what constitutes identities in childhood. As such, this chapter suggests that greater participation by children within the assessment process may aid practitioners in producing assessments that provide representations of identities that are more closely aligned to how children see themselves and significant others and ultimately how they make sense of their worlds.

#### ***“I think how a child sees itself is the most important thing”*: Children as a source of information**

While one might assume that child protection work is, by definition, child-centred, there is a persuasive body of research which suggests ‘practice tends to operate from an adult point of view, with little reference to childhood cultures and the need for children to be involved in the processes that concern them’ (Connolly *et al.* 2006:60). As is noted in previous chapters, the assessment documents suggested that whilst practitioners assert that the views of children and their families are important in assessment practice, there is little evidence to support this within the identity sections. Thereby whilst there appears general acceptance that children and young people have the capacity to participate in decisions that affect them and that their right to be listened to is acknowledged (as promoted, for example by Littlechild 2000; Cashmore 2002) the findings from this study reinforce Parton *et al.*’s (1997) observation from their analysis of children’s case files, that the voice of the child was notable for its

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<sup>60</sup> The design and theoretical basis to this multi-method approach in researching children’s own constructions of their identities is discussed in Chapter Five.

absence. This is particularly pertinent when considering children's identities for as James (2000) found when revisiting her earlier ethnography (James 1993), children play an active role in the negotiation, and re-negotiation, of their identities.

When considering the impact of the Assessment Framework upon practice Cleaver and Walker (2004:93) state the involvement of children and young people within the assessment process 'has not kept pace with parental involvement' noting that 'few young people understood the process of assessment, or could remember whether a social worker had explained to them what would happen and why'. The findings reported in the previous chapter that parent and carers' views were frequently not sought when practitioners considered children's identities appear to apply to the children within this study too. Within the data set of thirty-two Core Assessments only three identity sections (9.375%) recorded explicitly the views of the subject children, for example:

All the children stated that they would like to see each other on a regular basis. However Marley stated that she would not like to see Lee [sibling] on her own but would prefer if other people were around. Lee and Ryan [siblings] stated that they would like to see their mother but not yet. They stated they will get in touch with her when they are ready. Marley and Tyler [sibling] stated that they would like to see their father. *Marley, age 11. Core Assessment 7.*

Charlie has experienced bullying both at school and outside of school. Charlie talks about how he was called names at school such as 'itchy pants', 'skidders' and 'smelly'. He has described how a 10 year old child in his street used to throw stones at him and how a five year old child used to throw sticks at him. Charlie feels accepted within his foster placement and enjoys being there. He describes it as 'fantastic' and has said 'I really do like it here'. He appreciates the way he is being cared for in his placement, and sees this as different to how he was cared for at home. *Charlie, age 14. Core Assessment 28.*

Lili joined a local scout group recently with her two younger brothers, which she enjoys.... Here Lili has a friend called Emma and says that they are all lovely people to spend time with. This appears to have had a positive effect on Lili in terms of social inclusion and Lili says that she is really enjoying it there, making new friends. The group is beneficial for Lili as it is a small one of which her younger brothers also attend. *Lili, age 15 years. Core Assessment 18.*

While these three extracts comprise all the examples of identity sections that record the child's views, it can be questioned as to whether these comments report the children's own understandings of their identities. As can be noted the practitioners have employed active voicing and reported speech (Wooffitt 1992) to represent the views of the children and by telling the children's stories the practitioners are displaying their reasonableness and willingness to see things from the child's perspective. However, this does not threaten the rhetorical force of the main narrative (Taylor and White 2000). As with the content of many of the identity sections, within Marley's the focus is placed upon her views and those of her siblings about the management of their familial relationships. Lili's identity section cites her accounts of her integration into a Scouts group. Charlie's 'identity' is connected to his experiences of being bullied and being cared for in a foster home. As such, these are not recordings about the children's own accounts of their identities *per se* but are worker-selected constructions of assumed constituents of the child's sense of self.

This may reflect the difficulties that some practitioners encounter when managing identity as a stand-alone assessment dimension (as in Chapter Six). Further, it is interesting to note that the text in Marley's identity section could be found verbatim in the 'child's view' section of her assessment. This may suggest the practitioner was able to gather relevant information from Marley during the assessment process but may have 'cut and pasted' this material into the identity section being unable to formulate a notion of identity outside the context of the relational and domestic. Thus in this and other instances it remains debatable whether practitioners are able to capture the child's own perceptions of self and to conceptualise this within a more distinctive formulation of 'identity'.

Despite the apparent lack of inclusion of children's accounts of their identities it was evident that in some instances children's views were referred to elsewhere within the assessment documents. Eleven of the thirty-two Core Assessments (34.3%) recorded 'the child's view' in a dedicated section of the form. However, what was recorded in the 'child's view' section was often a reiteration of the practitioner's views, as these examples demonstrate:

Paulie is too young to enter into a discussion about his views about his parents and their care of him. However, from my observations, it is clear that he is a well-loved child and responds to this by showing great affection and love to both his parents.

*Paulie, age 2 years. Core Assessment 13.*

Stephanie clearly loves her mother very much and it is important that any decisions regarding her future take into account and respect Stephanie's very significant love for and attachment to her mother. *Stephanie, age 4 years. Core Assessment 2.*

Nathaniel is very young and is not able to understand the process of this assessment. However, from observation and analysis, Nathaniel needs a settled, calm life that has routine and stability, that enables him to remain in touch with his father and other important family members and where he has as much focus, attention and time from his mother as possible. *Nathaniel, age 5 years. Core Assessment 12.*

As these extracts suggest, children do not necessarily need to articulate their views for practitioners to *know* them. Alderson (2000a) has demonstrated how young children can make their views known and, of course, part of how we make sense of this is through observations and analysis. However what seems repeatedly evidenced within the identity sections is a typification of needs associated with children of a particular age (Burman 2008), with this being presented as a summation of the child's individual identities and likely viewpoint. Again this reaffirms the practitioner's powerful position of *knower* (as discussed in Chapter Six) and suggests that it is acceptable practice for practitioners to 'voice' the views they imagine a child may hold but mediated through the practitioner's knowledge of children's developmental needs. Thus we can observe above how the children's wishes and feelings can be conflated with or represented by his perceived 'needs', reaffirming the point (as discussed in Chapter Eight), that the needs and wants of children tend to be adult defined.

However there is evidence to suggest that some practitioners ascertain the views of older children. For example, the following extracts are taken from 'the child's view' section of the Core Assessments:

During Robbie's involvement with his advocate which was appointed in order for him to participate within the Family Group Meeting he was asked if he had a magic wand [what would he wish for] he would like 'to make mum better' because he wanted 'to make Thierry and mum feel happier'. He has indicated that he

was happy to live with his Mother, but has also indicated a wish to live with his grandfather and Thierry. Robbie clearly loves his mother, and does not want to hurt her feelings. It is important that he is able to maintain regular contact and overnight stays with her. *Robbie, age 9 years. Core Assessment 1.*

When offered 'three wishes' Steve-o requested:

1) No more tornadoes; 2) No war.

Plus more wishes including:

- Stop Tsunamis; make my friends rich; live in a mansion; make sure mum is okay and that her joints won't kill her; to wish his sister would stop making fun of him; to be clever; to know every letter of the alphabet; to be better at writing; to learn a language like Spanish; Steve-o said he would like to try different foods; Steve-o would like to start seeing dad again - to go on the weekend in the daytime; thinks dad is putting Hilary (his partner) first; for dad to get a better job and have more time off; for Hilary to change her face; Steve-o said he doesn't like the way Hilary looks and doesn't think she cares about his dad; for dad to dump Hilary and to marry someone who likes dogs and wears smart clothes; Steve-o mention lots of wires and electrocuting Hilary until he was encouraged to think about the consequences of this.

It was explained to Steve-o that his father would like him to suggest solutions to the problems related to their relationship.

His list was as follows:

1. For dad to change his job
2. For dad to work less hours.
3. Not to dump Hilary but for her to put some cream on her face as she looks scary and to dye her hair
4. To visit dad with J-J [sibling] on a Sunday from 1-5pm
5. To go swimming with dad (as J-J can't go due to skin allergies to go alternative weeks alone or with his friend Cameron or Joel)
6. See dad more next year
7. To see him some evenings (but then retracted this as he thinks this will upset dad and Hilary)

Steve-o would also like to go to a better school and wishes that nobody would die. (The wife of his mother's brother had recently died) Steve-o also appeared to be worried about his Uncle who has 'metal patches.' He also has strong worries that Mum might die. Mum has a condition, which affects her joints. It was made clear to Steve-o that his mother is unlikely to die prematurely due to this condition. *Steve-o, age 10 years. Core Assessment 15.*

These extracts indicate that practitioners are able to gather the views of children and do employ some creativity to ensure that the child is interested and engaged in the exercise. This reflects the findings of Mantle *et al.* (2007:800) who examined practitioners' interpretations of the wishes and feelings of children within private law matters, concluding that 'children were regarded as 'truth-tellers' with whom rapport could, in most cases, be readily established'. However in the above cases the rich data that Robbie and Steve-o supplied was not employed within their identity sections. In these and other instances similar exercises and illuminating insights about how the subject child sees his or herself and makes sense of their world failed to migrate to the identity section. This may suggest that although children's own views are deemed valid for some areas of assessment it would appear that practitioners seem less disposed to the use of children's views regarding their own identities. This is perhaps surprising given that identity implicates layers of complexity that make it difficult to *know* this aspect of the assessment. As such, one might expect practitioners to seek and welcome the views of children, and others, in this section of the assessment. However as noted by Holland (2004), there is some evidence to suggest that practitioners tend to give more credence to children's wishes that reaffirm the practitioners' own views, with discrepant views potentially discredited or omitted<sup>61</sup>. Given that Steve-o's identity section appears to present a very different picture of his identities (see below) compared to his comments above, this may be the case. Additionally, as noted in the previous chapter, the interests of the organisation may also be a persuasive influence in how children's identities are represented within the assessment documents.

Despite the tendency not to record explicit views from children within the identity sections, most practitioners reported in interview that children's representations of their own identities were the primary source of evidence they utilised in their assessments (see Chapter Six). This may suggest some discrepancy between how practitioners think and talk about practice and what actually is presented in the assessment document (Pithouse 1998; Taylor and White 2000). For example as one social worker explains:

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<sup>61</sup> Reflecting the phenomenon of 'confirmation bias' (Wolf *et al.* 1985. see also Reder *et al.* 1993) discussed in Chapter Six.

I think how a child sees itself is the most important thing. It's relevant because when you do work with them part of their, the way that their identity is formed in how they view themselves is obviously relevant. But I think that I also do take into account my own views on how they perceive themselves so I suppose that it is probably a combination of them both.

*Rose, social worker.*

Although it is suggested above that an understanding of the child's perceptions of his/her own identities is *the most important thing* in a practitioner's work with children, it is also noted that the child's own view of his or her identities are not viewed in isolation. It is proposed by Rose, above, that this recognition of the multifaceted ways of knowing results in a twofold assessment of the child's identities that is formed from a *combination* of how the child perceives his/herself and the practitioner's assessment of these perceptions. This narrativisation appears to exclude the views of other significant individuals within the child's life, thereby running counter to practitioner claims about their desire to 'get the broader picture' of the child through the analysis of how key others view the subject child (as discussed in Chapter Six). As such, practitioner commitment to exploring the multi-faceted nature of children's identities remains ambiguous.

Although the task of talking to children about their perceptions of self and sense of identity seems self evidently complex, it appears that such activity is a routine social work task for some practitioners and an exercise deemed enjoyable to the worker and child alike:

I think it's interesting as well because it's an ice-breaker when you're working with the children, to find out how they actually see themselves. It's not something that children, where I previously thought that they would just shrug their shoulders about, they get quite involved and tell me about the football team they support or their gang or their friends or hanging about in the club on a Saturday night. It's something that they really love to talk about, whether they are smokers or drinkers or whatever bands they are in to. It's something that they see as important.

*Lola, social worker.*

As Lola observes, the task of talking to children about themselves and their day-to-day lives can be a valuable tool for engaging with and understanding children. The emphasis here is placed upon *how they [children] actually see themselves* suggesting

that practitioners value the opportunity to hear the child's own narrative and that it can be beneficial to the child to share their views on what is *important* to them. Thus it would appear that encouraging children to tell their own story is a useful and enjoyable social work tool to the child and practitioner alike. Parton and O'Byrne (2000) view such use of accounts and stories as a key therapeutic tool in enabling clients to understand themselves and their identities and begin to appreciate how these understandings influence behaviour and relationships and how change in self-understanding occurs (also see Taylor 2006). However the seeking of accounts of the child's 'story' appears less a therapeutic tool in which to engage with clients but more a tool in evidence gathering - a sort of discursive search procedure - from which the child's identities are constructed from an assemblage of components and interests that include selections from what the child has chosen to disclose to the practitioner. Further, how practitioners deploy this information (e.g. by positioning ownership of 'the voice' to the practitioner and not the child) is an important aspect in how children and childhood is constructed within assessment practice (see Chapter Eight).

### **Telling their own stories: Children as narrators**

The value of listening to children's perceptions of the lives they are living cannot be underestimated. As the Bridge Child Care Consultancy Service state:

Children are living the experience and can give a more accurate picture of what life is like in a family than any assessment made by a professional. (1995:172)

From a social constructionist perspective on the accomplishment of identities, children should be considered as valid constructors of their identities as their adult counterparts (see Parton and O'Byrne 2000). By engaging subject children in 'telling their own story' (as in 'Steve-o' over) practitioners go some way in engaging with children in a way similar to their encounters with parents as adult clients. The construction of narratives in the form of story telling is viewed as a 'basic linguistic pattern for conveying experience between people' (Cedersund 1999:77) and is an intrinsic part of most childhood experiences (Figs 2003). As such, children may be more comfortable and able story-tellers than parent or carers. However, as we noted earlier, the identity sections within the assessment documents record not the child's own narratives but rather a story about the child with the practitioner as narrator. In



light of this tendency by practitioners to narrate their version of children's 'stories' I was interested to explore what material children shared when asked to 'tell their own stories', and how readily children engaged in this task. Hence, as part of my multi-method approach, the subject children were offered the opportunity to provide 'a story about me'. Four of the ten participant children chose to engage in this exercise: three did so in written form and one using a picture as a means to share his story<sup>62</sup>. The children's written stories were all brief and have been reproduced here in their entirety:

I'm a dog lover. I prefer animals to people, as I'm shy. I don't like cats. I find it hard to talk to new people.  
*Lili, age 15 years. Core Assessment 18.*

Don't bully me and don't kick and punch me. Don't give me fish [to eat]. Red is my favourite colour. I support Manchester United. I am Welsh so don't call me English.  
*Steve-o, age 10 years. Core Assessment 15.*

I am fine and I've got new friends like Bradley, Bobbie, Jamie. I've been to the shop today with Bradley and Oliver [friends].  
*Robbie, age 9 years. Core Assessment 1.*

The children were not given any prompts or boundaries in writing their stories and it is interesting that despite the brevity of their accounts they, as narrators, appear to place emphasis on their social interactions. Lili describes herself as preferring *animals to people* depicting herself as *shy* and stating that she finds it *hard to talk to new people*. Steve-o, too, seems to identify some concerns he has about his encounters in the world telling the reader *don't bully me and don't kick and punch me* perhaps indicating prior experience of such things. Steve-o also provides a clear account of his nationality: *I am Welsh so don't call me English*<sup>63</sup>. Robbie talks of making new friends and of a recent trip *to the shop today with Bradley and Oliver*. The specific references to their social encounters suggest that personal agency and the relational world are important to them (see James 1993; CRAE 2007). The following extract from the final paragraph of Lili's identity section demonstrates the practitioner's knowledge of the importance of her social interactions to Lili's sense of self:

<sup>62</sup> This story will be discussed later in the chapter.

<sup>63</sup> In Chapter Eight it is noted that practitioners frequently failed to record children's nationality and their views of nationality and culture within the identity sections. It was suggested that such omissions suggest some 'oppositional dichotomy' (as in Prout 2005) in which children's identities are constructed differently to adult identities.

Lili shows competency in individual, physical activities such as ice skating and horse-riding which she enjoys. It is evident that Lili finds these activities very rewarding combined with the interaction with people and animals she meets in conjunction with them. *Lili, age 15 years. Core Assessment 18.*

Within this extract the practitioner demonstrates her knowledge of Lili, noting the child's *interaction with people and animals* as something that is important to her, which reflects Lili's own emphasis within her 'story about me'. Thereby we might consider that her social worker has relevant knowledge of what is important to Lili, suggesting that time has been invested in 'getting to know' the child. However not all identity sections reflect the views and interests of the children to the extent that appears in the case of Lili. Consider for example the following extract from Steve-o's identity section:

As shared in the above section related to emotional and behavioural development, there are issues relating to his identity that need to be addressed. He is experiencing currently negativity from his siblings and his peer. Until now it would appear that he has seen himself as a separate and valued person however the negative messages from his sibling and peers could possibly arrest his growing sense of self. A child needs to have feeling of belonging and acceptance by family, peer group and wider society to enable him to develop into an adult that feels good about himself. *Steve-o, age 10 years. Core Assessment 15.*

Here the conceptual closeness of identity as an assessment dimension is made explicit through the practitioner referring the reader to another assessment domain (as discussed in Chapter Seven). In this way the practitioner employs a sense of cohesion across the assessment by implicating different components to consider in terms of Steve-o's identity (as in Hall 1997). Within this extract it is stated that Steve-o *is experiencing currently negativity from his siblings and his peers* however the relevant details are discussed more fully within the practitioner's entries into the Core Assessment section on 'emotional and behavioural development'. Hence, the relevance of this for his identities is not explicated. Similarly, Robbie's identity section<sup>64</sup> makes no reference to his interactions and friendships with peers, which is something that his own story clearly invokes as important. The reasons for this are not

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<sup>64</sup> Robbie, age 9 years. Core Assessment 1. Extracts from Robbie's identity section are reproduced on pages 224 and 231.

clear and may stem from insufficient time spent *knowing* the child. But may also reflect a tendency to collapse various aspects of domestic intimacies as proxies for the child's sense of self (as discussed in Chapters Six and Seven).

### **Potential barriers to children as narrators**

Although practitioners frequently report that they have little time to invest in direct work with children (see Schofield and Brown 1999; Leveridge 2002; Garrett 2003), this may not fully explain a lack of accounting from the child's own perspective. As Lola explains above, children are usually very willing to share information about themselves with practitioners and this information sharing can be a useful *ice-breaking* exercise. From my own research encounters with the subject children, engaging them in the study was not difficult, with half of the subject children choosing to participate in more than one exercise. Although the exercises were usually brief in nature, the data gathered offered rich insights into how the children viewed themselves, significant others and made sense of their world. The information gained from the exercises greatly repaid the modest time invested and hence we might question the idea that time itself is the sole reason why practitioners seem to exclude the narratives of the child within assessments of children's identities.

Horwath (2002:208) identified three common themes when she explored why practitioners did not work directly with children. First, as above, practitioners considered that they had insufficient time to establish 'meaningful relationships' with children; secondly, practitioners questioned their skills in working with children, especially young children or those who were deemed difficult to communicate with; and lastly, working collaboratively with other professionals, such as teachers, was considered as a missed opportunity in establishing effective communication with children. The findings of Horwath are reflected within this study, as well as other barriers to communicating with children.

It became apparent that some of the practitioners in this study were cautious in their use of the stories they gained from children due to concerns about the validity of these accounts – were they somehow 'true' or not? Also, there were practitioner concerns that the children were not of a capacity to fully articulate adequately. The notion of the age-relatedness of children's competence (see Mantle *et al.* 2006) and perceived

limitations of the children's narrative capacity appeared as a theme within the assessments, as the following extract suggests:

It is difficult to assess fully what sense of identity Nathaniel has as his language and communication skills are delayed. In order to develop a secure sense of self and an identity defined by his place in his family, his peer group and the wider world, Nathaniel needs care that is determined by his individual needs...  
*Nathaniel, age 5. Core Assessment 12.*

Similarly, in an interview with the assistant team manager it was noted that:

It would depend largely on age, um, so as a teenager, talking to me probably, because I'd have quite a strong narrative capacity, of my life, um, and I suppose as well I had quite a privileged upbringing really in terms of care. But a lot of the teenagers we work with, perhaps, wouldn't be able to provide us with that narrative. It might be too painful and they might not even know it. They might not even know, have that sense of coherence, you know. *Sioned, assistant team manager.*

It thus appears that practitioners' assessments of a child's ability to use *language and communication skills, narrative capacity* and the child's *sense of coherence* appear as possible factors in how practitioners use, or do not use, children's narratives explicitly within assessments of their identities. However, there is an increasing body of research that suggests children's capacities and competence may be greater than traditionally imagined (Neale 2002; Smith *et al.* 2003). For example, within health care Alderson (1993) found that children who had experience of major surgery could develop a capacity for understanding and decision-making far exceeding commonly held perceptions about children's competence. Further, Mantle *et al.* (2007:790) suggest that children who have experienced parental separation can develop wisdom 'beyond their years'. As such, it would appear that children's competence might be related to the life events they have experienced, and to exclude these views may act to prevent practitioners from gaining valuable insights into what is happening within the family. As Lieblich *et al.* (1998:8) note, life stories are intimately about 'self' and herein lies their importance in how we grasp the identities of others:

Stories imitate life and present an inner reality to the outside world; at the same time, however, they shape and construct the narrator's personality and reality. The story is one's identity, a story created, told, revised, and retold throughout life. We know

or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell.

Therefore to exclude a child's account for fear that it may not somehow be 'accurate' denies the child the opportunity to tell their story and construct their sense of self in the assessment. Take, for example, the following interview extract with J-J<sup>65</sup>, a boy aged 12:

Researcher: If I asked you to describe to me your identity what would you think I was asking you to do?

J-J: To tell you about me.

Researcher: So your identity is about the things that make you 'you'?

J-J: Yeah. My identity is about all the things that make me special. Well that's what my Mum said. She said that she spoke to you about us kids and she told you all the things that make us special. Like me being really good at skateboarding, yeah? I mean really, really good and about me being good at most things, yeah? I'm the best in the street you know? Did she tell you that?

Researcher: Well Mum told me that you love your skateboarding and that you're always so busy out there that she can never get you in for your tea!

J-J: (Laughs) She would say that! But I am the best, you know. MTV want me to be on there, showing my stuff. My skills.

Researcher: So are you going to be on MTV? Because if you are I'd like to watch that.

J-J: Well we don't know yet. Mum is going to try and get the address and then she says she'll help me write to them and I bet they'll want me. I can show everyone then what I can do, you know. Steve-o [sibling] says that I won't get on but he don't know nothing. He's just jealous 'cos I'm bad [good] and he sucks. That girl [Steve-o] can't even stand on it proper without falling on his big fat bum (laughs) I mean, head. Saddo! Where I'm dead good.

To focus on whether the information he shared with me was 'true' (such as J-J's claims that he is the 'best' skateboarder or that MTV are interested in his talents) detracts from what he is actually sharing about himself: that he chooses to construct his identities in part from his claims of skateboarding prowess and his engagement with peers. He appears to employ these claims to set him aside, and yet will share his interests with others, in this instance his sibling. As noted by Baumeister (1986) 'identity' confronts us with the task of determining how we are different from other

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<sup>65</sup> J-J, age 11 years. *Core Assessment 16*. J-J was the only child from the sample who chose to participate in a face-to-face recorded interview.

people – others who, on the surface at least, appear quite similar to ourselves and within his account J-J identifies himself in a context of others, identifying his brother and peers as different (see also James 1993). By contrast his identity section in the assessment form presents a different perspective of who he ‘is’:

Much of this was covered in the above section [emotional and behavioural development]. I do not feel that J-J has a positive sense of identity within the family. He needs to develop and see himself as a separate and valued person. He appears to see himself as having a role in being the saviour of the family. It is felt that he needs to be able to understand his own feelings relating to belonging and acceptance by family, peer group and wider society. This work I do not believe can be achieved in isolation. The adults in J-J’s life need to work together to provide J-J with consistent and appropriate messages that will reinforce stability and consistency as a way forward to build on J-J’s very low self-esteem. *J-J, age 11 years. Core Assessment 16.*

The contrast between J-J’s account of his identities and that of his social worker demonstrates the selective and temporal nature of identities (McAdams 1993). The practitioner focuses attention upon J-J’s *sense of identity within the family*, which is viewed as problematic. The child focuses on his abilities and how these aid his social integration and his account presents a much more positive picture. These two accounts were provided at different times and for different purposes. The point however is that assessment documents offer a time specific and particular perspective that may not reflect the dynamic and subjective nature of identity.

### ***“This is a picture of Chester and a whale...” Employing children’s creativity***

As noted above, practitioners highlighted the difficulties they encountered when children did not hold the speech and language skills required to be able to converse and articulate their identities. Some practitioners appeared to overcome this difficulty by employing tools in their direct work with children. Two of the thirty-two identity sections (6.25%) made explicit reference to direct work being undertaken with the subject children. This suggests that practitioners had either not undertaken direct work with the subject children, or had failed to make explicit their activities and findings regarding direct work. However neither of the two assessments recorded the nature or content of the direct work:

Robbie has a clear understanding of his immediate family and knows his birth father, Brian, although he does not have a secure relationship with his father. It is not clear from *the work undertaken with him so far* as to what sense of coherence he has about his life, for example when and why his father left the household. *Robbie, age 9 years. Core Assessment 1 (italics added)*

A number of age appropriate tools were used in a direct work session with Jade and her sister Annie. Both children engaged well with the activity. Whilst remaining open to interpretation, the outcomes suggest that:

- both children have a good understanding of their immediate family structure
- both children have a limited understanding of their place within extended family structure
- both children are somewhat confused and anxious in respect of current family difficulties

Neither child revealed any areas of significant confusion/anxiety. However, this was a one-off exercise.

These results are consistent with other aspects of assessment.

*Jade, age 5. Core Assessment 30*

As can be noted, when discussing direct work, practitioners tended to focus on the outcome rather than the process. This potentially reduces the importance of the direct work to little more than an administrative task, employed by practitioners to gather information and demonstrate that they have met and worked with the subject child(ren). This adds little to the assessment of the children's identities. However focusing on the child's engagement in direct work can provide valuable insights into how a child views the world and others (see Alderson 2000a; Christensen and James 2000). Take, for example, the children who opted to draw pictures in their participation in this study. Billie (age 4) and Stephanie (age 5)<sup>66</sup> both drew pictures of themselves, with Billie also providing a picture of her social worker and myself. Although the pictures in isolation reveal little, other than both children were aware of their gendered identities as girls, my notes recording what they said whilst creating their pictures are more revealing of how they see themselves:

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<sup>66</sup> Billie, age 3 years. Core Assessment 26 (joint assessment); Stephanie, age 4 years. Core Assessment

(Drawing a picture of themselves)

Billie: It's me in my white dress that I wore when we went to Jodie's [aunt] for the party. And I put the flowers there, see? And my hair is going to be in bunches, like Nanny does them for school. But I want plaits like Frankie [school friend]. And I'll draw a big sun with a smiley face. That's nice. But I'm not drawing Chester [sibling] or Mummy. Just me.

Stephanie: That's my legs and my arms and my eyes. My hair is crazy! Really, really, really curly. That's it there. And my dress is going to be pink. Just like Stephanie's [character from a popular children's television programme, Stephanie's chosen pseudonym in this study].

Davies (1982:26) has shown 'children do not overtly voice doubts about their own normality' however a sense of sameness is important for children, providing for them a feeling of belonging, a way in which to smooth over the potential which some aspect of diversity or deviation might have to rupture the social relations which exist between one child and another (James 1993; Christensen 1998). Social presentation and appearance appear to be important to the girls, enabling them to make associations with others, such as Billie's school friend Frankie and Stephanie's desire to be like a popular television character. As with other children (see Erikson 1963, 1968; Corsaro 1985), peer group influence and ideas from the wider society (media) inform the way Billie and Stephanie see themselves. Children's ability to associate or disassociate themselves with or from others, otherwise known as the process of 'othering' (see de Beauvoir 1968), also forms a central part in Kohlberg's (1963) theory on the development of moral reasoning. Thus we can note a sense of closeness or association with others in both Billie and Stephanie's constructions of themselves. By contrast, Billie's sibling, Chester<sup>67</sup>, appealed to a more distinctive sense of self achievement and worth in creating an imaginary place in which he could distinguish himself rather than be associated with peers or significant others:

(Drawing a picture of himself):

Chester: This is a picture of Chester and a whale. It's a humpback whale who is caught in the net – poor Whale. Whales live in the sea and are very big. You can have humpback whales, blue whales, killer whales who are black and white, and whales

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<sup>67</sup> Chester, age 4 years. Core Assessment 26 (joint assessment).



with stripes. Humpback whales are the best. I saved the humpback whale from the net. It would of died. I'm a good boy.

In his account Chester seeks to assert his moral position as a 'good boy', who is kind and helpful whilst also using his story to impart his knowledge about whales. What this might suggest is that Chester, in contrast to Billie and Stephanie, seems more concerned to seek some individual esteem, sharing his knowledge to impress (Holloway and Valentine 2000). While it was not the purpose of the study to reflect upon the therapeutic insights to be derived from such encounters it is nonetheless suggested that reflecting upon what children share during the process of direct work rather than upon the informational needs of case management can be more fruitful for practitioners and families. The children who took part in this study were imaginative and creative in how they presented themselves and those areas of their lives that they deemed important (as in James 1993). Thus, J-J's skateboarding prowess, Billie's desire to be like her school friend and Chester's skill in defining himself as knowledgeable about whales and a 'good boy', give a flavour of how children selected and made prominent preferred attributes that typically differed to the characteristics chosen by practitioners in their assessments. We now explore further the social aspects of identity in the way that children's accounts invoke a sense of relatedness that reflect the deeply subjective nature of self-ascription.

### **Friendships and Self: Identity, association and disassociation**

When the children in this study constructed their own identities they placed notably more emphasis upon the social aspects of their identities than practitioners did. For example, the children's narratives about 'self' included perceptions of their integration within their communities (such as Robbie speaking of making *new friends* and going *to the shop*) as well as their identifications with broader social groupings (as in Steve-o's statement *I'm Welsh so don't call me English*). This might suggest that the middle-childhood participants in my sample were aware of memberships, expectations and roles (see Scourfield *et al.* 2006). By contrast practitioners tended to position children's identities primarily within the family (see Chapters Six and Seven). As such it may be that children place more importance than workers on their membership of or connection with wider social groups when generating accounts about 'self'. For example, the significant others that three children listed when they undertook the 'who knows me best' activity identified a wide range of family and

friends (Lili listed - me, pet, boyfriend, sibling, mum, dad, sibling x 4); (Steve-o identified neighbourhood friends x 6, school friends x 13); (Robbie noted neighbourhood friends x 9, sibling, school friends x 3). Here the children consider people outside their immediate family as knowing them as well as or better than their close kin. By comparison, in practitioner accounts of their (own adult) identities (Chapter Eight) wider societal memberships and a sense of personal agency came across strongly but as a component of an adult as opposed to a child identity:

I think maybe as an adult, and I think that this is a difference between adults and children, an adult identity is to do with things like social status and jobs, and so forth. But when you are a child that maybe isn't as significant. I suppose still where they fit into society maybe, but I wouldn't necessarily think that a child would think about that. *Rose, social worker.*

Yet, the children in this study appeared to hold a different view, placing much significance on *where they fit into society* (as in CRAE 2007). We might surmise therefore that practitioners and children construct identity differently with the former focusing more on the child's familial context and children tending to include, if not prioritise, wider social aspects of friendships, social activities and locality within their constructions of identities.

Within the images the children included in their photo diaries the majority by far were those of their friends. In total, the children took thirty-eight photographs (42.56%) of their friends (two with the subject children) and thirty-two photographs, which captured family members and friends of the family. As summarised in Table 6 (below):

**Table 6: Photographs within photo diaries**

<b>Thematic group</b>	<b>Photograph content</b>	<b>No. of photographs</b>	<b>Total amount: N = 112</b>
Friends/Peers:	Friends	33	36
	Boyfriend/Girlfriend	3	
Family:	Parent/carer	7	32
	Sibling	20	
	Other family member	1	
	Family group	1	
Self:	Family friend	3	
	Self	8	18
	Self with sibling	1	
	Self with pet	2	
	Self with friend(s)	2	
	Self with parent/carer	5	
Activity/Skills:	Activity	12	13
	Achievement	1	
Locality:	Home/belongings	6	6
Pets:	Pet	5	5
Other:	Researcher	2	2

As such, it would seem that the children were as keen for me to know about their friends and activities as part of how they viewed themselves as they were for me to know about their family. This reflects Erikson's (1963) epigenetic stage of identity development 'industry and inferiority' during which it is claimed that children (age 6-12 years) develop a sense of social competence and the ability to perceive how others value these competences. Similarly, Holloway and Valentine (2000) found it was within the context of peer group culture that young people learned how to articulate their individuality while at the same time conforming to peer group identities. Interestingly, the impact of the children's friendships/peer groups in this study were highlighted in three (9.375%) of the thirty-two Core Assessments:

He is experiencing currently negativity from his siblings and his peers... *Steve-o, age 10. Core Assessment 15*

Charlie has experienced bullying both at school and outside of school. Charlie talks about how he was called names at school such as 'itchy pants', 'skidders' and 'smelly'. He has described how a 10 year old child in his street used to throw stones at him

and how a five year old child used to throw sticks at him.  
*Charlie, age 14. Core Assessment 28.*

Lili joined a local scout group recently with her two younger brothers, which she enjoys. The group holds 8 and is a suitable number of people for Lili to interact with. Here Lili has a friend called Emma and says that they are all lovely people to spend time with. This appears to have had a positive effect on Lili in terms of social inclusion and Lili says that she is really enjoying it there, making new friends. The group is beneficial for Lili as it is a small one of which her younger brothers also attend.

*Lili, age 15 years. Core Assessment 18.*

While these extracts suggest that peer relations can be cast as either a negative or positive influence on a child's self-perception, their inclusion in the assessment was infrequent. Hence, we may speculate that practitioners may be neglecting a valuable seam in their assessments of the child's sense of self beyond the immediate family. Yet within interviews, practitioners were likely to invoke peer group influences as relevant to children's sense of self:

If you're talking about 3 or 4 or 5 year old kids, considerations of sibling and peer relationships and those types of relationships would have less emphasis. However if it was someone of 15 or 16 there would be a more direct role. *Christian, senior social work practitioner.*

Well I think as social relationships grow, familial relationships become less important. And I think that's for everybody, it's a natural part of life, about breaking away. You know, it fits in with a lot of the theories about stages and what you need to be able to achieve, so yeah, and for example, teenagers they almost like cut their parents off in that period and Lili was still going through that. So, at a rough guess, say between the ages of 6 and 16 friendships take more of a priority. *Alison, student social worker.*

As these extracts suggest, when talking about their assessment practice respondents were likely to consider the influence of friendships upon children's identities during adolescence as more influential. Erikson (1963, 1968) clearly emphasises the importance of peer group relations in the identity development of adolescents, encompassing his 'industry and inferiority' (6-12 years) and 'identity or role confusion' (13-18 years) stages. Nevertheless, the view above that between *the ages of 6 and 16 friendships take more of a priority* does not seem to be reflected within

the assessment documents, albeit the data from the children does reveal the considerable significance of peers.

When considering the use of the photo diaries as data it was important to recognise that the images taken by the children were obviously restricted to where and when the children took the cameras and the opportunities they had to use them (for example, Charlie's<sup>68</sup> camera was confiscated when he took it to school). It was also important to note that 'although children do actively carve out their own childhoods they do so within and between relatively fluid cultural constructions of what that 'childhood' could or should entail' (James 1993:19). Hence the freedom afforded to the children in undertaking this exercise may be restricted by social conventions. However, in some cases it was apparent that the children employed the cameras to demonstrate how in their everyday lives they and their friends flaunt such restrictions. For example, two children who participated when this exercise was piloted<sup>69</sup> chose to include pictures that could be considered as risky. Boss, aged 15, included ten pictures of either himself or his friends 'getting wrecked' (smoking cannabis and drinking alcohol) as well as three photographs of his friends 'trespassing' on private land. Whereas Vinny aged 13, included five of himself, his friend and his dog on a fishing expedition, stating with pride 'we ain't go no license and if the pigs [Police] came I'd set Jackie Chan [pseudonym for his dog] on them!' Thus, it would seem that Boss and Vinny's use of photographs to reveal aspects of their identities included elements of the anti-social. Indeed it seemed that the two enjoyed constructing themselves as 'bad boys', which may also be reflected in their choice of pseudonyms within this study. Their choice of photographs also led me to reflect upon the ways in which children construct a moral dimension to their sense of self, as is explored next.

### **Morality in assessments of children's identities**

Goffman (1959) considered the moral character of self-presentations arguing that by presenting oneself in a certain way a moral right was thereby claimed to be treated in an appropriate fashion. Thus, for Goffman (1955), morality was not something diffusely located in society, but rather mediated and renewed through everyday social interactions. In light of this Boss and Vinny's choice of images in their photo-diaries

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<sup>68</sup> Charlie, age 14 years. Core Assessment 28.

<sup>69</sup> Boss and Vinny are not subject to assessments within the data set.

led me to consider how children make sense of 'right and wrong' in their everyday lives and also examine if morality was an area that practitioners considered within their assessment of children's identities. As noted by Hart and Killen (1995), Freud considered morality to derive from the superego's identification and assimilation of parental values reinforced through rewards and punishment, as is part of many social learning theories (such as Bandura and Walters 1959; Skinner 1974), wherein it is deemed that children can be trained to become moral citizens (see Wilson 1993). However Kohlberg (1963) and Piaget (1932) noted that parental influence is just one aspect informing moral development, with the child retaining some agency in how they make sense of parental messages (i.e., some lessons may be more easily and readily learnt than others). Further, Kohlberg and Piaget also claim that peer groups are likely to have significant influence upon a child's moral development especially with regard to a child's grasp of justice and equity as children perceive their peers more as equals than they do their parents (also see Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow 1990). Hence it was important to explore the construction of morality within the identity sections of the thirty-two Core Assessments.

As noted by Ferguson (2004) the roots of intervention in family life derive from a perceived need for order that calls for the moral judgement on motives and identities. Social workers in their everyday practices employ moral formulations both to understand and establish characters and needs, and to determine, or sanction, the appropriate intervention (Cuff 1993; Parton *et al.* 1997; Hall *et al.* 1996; Hall 1997). Decisions about services offered or sanctions imposed are not based merely on the facts of the case but expectations of typical characters (such as an out of control adolescent, an abusive parent, etc). It is perhaps unsurprising that the assessments within the data set were a rich source of moral reasoning about the parents. Thus within the identity sections, it is the morality of parents rather than the children that seem of importance to practitioners, as the following extracts suggest:

It is likely that Robbie has a fragile self-esteem; because of the inconsistency and at times chaotic care he has been afforded by his mother. Reinforcing this is the fact that his father has very little contact with Robbie, thus perhaps emphasizing to Robbie his sense of not being an automatic source of concern or interest to his parents. Robbie now needs care that is responsive to his individual needs... *Robbie, age 9 years. Core Assessment 1*

Mary [mother] does not know the paternity of Yusef. She thinks it could be one of two men, Mr R or Mr H. Yusef has talked in contact and within his foster placement about “daddy Mr”. Mary has spoken to her solicitor about Yusef’s paternity as she would like him to know who his father is. *Yusef, age 7 years. Core Assessment 17*

Leon has only known two main carers throughout his young life and has enjoyed stability and security within the family for most of it. Should Mark [father] continue his turbulent and frequently violent relationship with his ex-girlfriend, then it is inevitable that this will have a significant impact upon the stability Leon has so far enjoyed. Shelia [paternal grandmother] understandably objected to Mark’s alleged attempt to move his ex-girlfriend into the family home. As a result Mark told her that she would have to leave, despite the fact that Shelia had nowhere to go. Whilst this situation was temporarily resolved and Shelia remains at the property, her name is not on the tenancy, which renders her vulnerable to eviction by Mark. This would consequently leave Leon without the stabilising and protective influence of his grandmother, to whom Leon has a strong attachment and very much identifies as a maternal figure in his life. *Leon, age 9 years. Core Assessment 20*

These extracts from the children’s identity sections are rich in material that invoke and question the moral probity of the parents. Within Robbie’s identity section the practitioner associates Robbie’s perceived *fragile self-esteem* with *inconsistency*, and the *chaotic care he has been afforded by his mother* coupling this to the claim that his father had not made himself available to play a part in Robbie’s’ life or be a protective factor. In the second extract the emphasis appears to be on the notion that Yusef’s father could be *one of two men* rather than how this might affect Yusef and how he makes sense of the world. In the third extract the life choices of Leon’s father appears to be of more interest to the practitioner than how this impacts on Leon and his sense of self. As such, we can observe how practitioners have employed morally laden words and phrases (*chaotic, one of two men*) to relay the message that these parents are in some way inadequate (as in Vojak 2009). This is further reinforced in the latter example where Leon’s grandmother *understandably objected* to his father’s plan to cohabit with his ex-girlfriend. Thereby, in these extracts, the least ‘factual’ part of the assessment becomes the strongest message relayed (as in Hall 1997).

None of the assessments within the data set included explicit reference to the subject child’s morality suggesting that practitioners do not perceive morality as an area to be

considered within assessments of children's identities. Morality in the sense of being 'good' or 'bad' was frequently implicit in children's accounts (e.g., as in Boss and Vinny's eagerness to be seen as 'bad boys' and Chester statement *I'm a good boy* above). Hence it may be that the aspect of morality within children's identities may be an area, like children's social agency, that is perceived by children to be more influential to their identities than practitioners allow for in their assessments. The omission of children as moral agents within assessments may be because (as with nationality, culture and religion) practitioners view the notion as too abstruse to apply to children's particular identities. Alternatively, the focus on the morality of the parent/carers reflects that, for explanatory and practical purposes, parent and carers are more the subject of the assessments than the children (as in Holland 2004).

## **Summary**

The multi-method research design employed by the children in this data set unearth how children make specific reference to their social encounters, suggesting that agency and the relational world are important to them. The children's accounts in this study help reveal how they assert a sense of self through their perceived closeness to others, as well as how they distinguish themselves from others too. Further, the children appear to place great importance on friendships and social activities within their constructions of identities, which was not reflected within the Core Assessments. Morality in the sense of being 'good' or 'bad' was frequently implicit in children's accounts yet none of the assessments within the data set included explicit reference to the subject child's morality. Hence it may be that aspects of morality and diversity within children's sense of self may be an area, like children's social agency, that is perceived by children to be more influential to their identities than practitioners allow for in their assessments.

As has been demonstrated within the previous chapters, identity within the Core Assessments within this data set is both a selective and contingent construct. How identity is described within the Core Assessments stands in contrast to how the children who participated in this study account for their own identities. However it is not my intention to claim that the Piagetian proposition that there are important qualitative differences between a child's understanding of the world and that of the



practitioners as adults is somehow evidenced in this research. Rather it is suggested that practitioners appear to over simplify children's identities within assessments.

As is noted in previous chapters, the analysis of assessment documents suggest that whilst practitioners assert that the views of children, and their families, are considered as important in assessment practice, there is little evidence to support this within the identity sections. Within the data set of thirty-two Core Assessments only three identity sections recorded the views of the subject children, and these not recording the children's own accounts of their identities *per se* but are worker-selected constructions that are provided as proxies or examples of assumed constituents of the child's sense of self. What seems repeatedly evidenced within the identity sections is a typification of needs and behaviours associated with children of a particular age (Burman 2008), with this being presented as a summation of the child's individual identities and likely viewpoint. Extracts from the 'child's view' section of the Core Assessments indicate that practitioners are able to gather the views of children and do employ some creativity to ensure that the child is interested and engaged in the exercise. However, this rich source of data about how the subject child makes sense of their self and their social world fails to migrate to the identity section.

The children who took part in this study did not appear to be restricted in how they viewed their identities but were creative in shaping how to present themselves and those areas that they deemed important in their lives (as in James 1993). Practitioners appear to account for their restrictive constructions of children's identities by invoking notions of age-related children's competence (see Mantle *et al.* 2006) and perceived limitations of the children's narrative capacity. Further, the tendency of practitioners to position children's identities within the relational context of the immediate family acts as a barrier to more individualised accounts from children about significant others in their everyday world. Thus practitioners tend to focus upon usually problematic familial relationships, whereas children (as in this study) might focus on their abilities, friendships, social integration and morality and thereby present a more far-reaching and positive picture of their identities. The final chapter in this thesis will now consider how practitioners can change their practice to create assessments that can capture these more individualised and unique aspects of a child's identities.

## **Chapter Eleven**

### **Re-Constructing Identities – Conclusions and Implications for Practice**

#### **Introduction**

The aim of this thesis has been to explore how social work practitioners attempt to define children's identities within one specific area of Child Protection procedures, the Core Assessment. This study has located social work in the everyday written and spoken artefacts of professional activity, which are treated as text, interaction and performance and has sought to discover and analyse the practitioners' typical ways for demonstrating how they construct a child's identities in their day-to-day work. The views of the subject children, parents and carers have been sought and demonstrate marked differences between how they and the practitioners construct children's identities. Within this chapter I seek to integrate these different understandings in order to establish a model of better assessment practice. In short, this study calls for practitioners to utilise more artistry and creativity within their assessments of children's identities. To do this, it is suggested, that practitioners need to re-conceptualise identities in practice. They need to be encouraged to think about different ways to understand and explain identities, and to move away from their typically constrained accounts of identities that inadequately represent the individuality of the children in Core Assessments.

#### **Key Findings**

We now summarise key findings and discuss their implications for practice that aims to promote a more individuated assessment of children's identities.

#### ***"Identity is a minefield, isn't it?" The hidden complexities in assessing identities***

[T]he social worker creates a subject who is characterised by universal subjectivity, one which applies to all individuals and yet to no one in particular.  
(Philp 1979:91).

Client identities in social work are paradoxical. Firstly, social work practitioners are interested in identifying individuals in society in need of professional intervention and secondly, through assessment categorise these individuals in order to ascertain how best to help them (as in Hall *et al.* 2006; Hall and Slembrouck 2009). As such, as

Philp (above) suggests, once categorised as a client it may be difficult to delineate the individuality of that person. A key finding from this study is that, for a number of reasons, delineating individual identities in assessment appears problematic.

From the interviews with practitioners, parents, carers and subject children, and the analysis of assessment documents, it is apparent that there are a number of ways to construct identities, with the very term 'identity' invoking many different understandings. Chapters Six, Seven and Eight have explored practitioner constructions of identities in childhood. It has been suggested that practitioners construct children's identities as more simplistic, less socially sophisticated than adult identities and that in managing the task of assessing identities practitioners tend to employ proxies as a means to search for and account for identities. These proxies for identities often consist of: attachments to care givers, familial identity, and appraisals of children's self-esteem. The practitioners' knowledges relevant to this process appear rooted in developmental theories, which construct children as relational entities, and therein lies the risk of ignoring the child's own grasp of their individuality.

In contrast, as demonstrated in Chapter Nine, the parents and carers equate identity much more with the nuanced individuality of the child. Assessments that demonstrate their children's uniqueness rather than routinised accounts of standardised children's needs are what parents and carers expect practitioners to produce. Reflecting in part the views of their parents and carers, Chapter Ten describes how the subject children construct their identities as intimately social, local and networked beyond the family. The child participants in this study negotiated their identities within the realm of the social, placing emphasis on similarities and differences in how they come to understand self and others (as in James 1993). As such, within this relatively small case study, many different ways of understanding identities have been unearthed and this, unsurprisingly, problematises the practitioner's task of creating assessments of children's identities that reflect the multiple sources of potential understanding.

Derived from the ideas of Mead (1934) and Berger and Luckmann (1966) we know that identities are a socially constructed composite of different elements, dependent on our social environment and the opportunities this affords us. As has been explored, in

Chapter Seven, when considering what aspects of identity to include in their assessments, practitioners appear to differentiate between elements of identities that are considered as more or less constant, such as the family composition, compared to those aspects that are considered more fluid and dynamic, such as the child's level of self-esteem and religion/spirituality. This view from the practitioners suggests that they perceive some aspects of identities to shift and change as a result of personal experiences and life events and in this sense identities are not something they cast as simply innate or inherited, but as learned and acquired (as in James [1890] 1950). Of course, our gender, ethnicity, class, and ability shape our identities and we also engage in some self-actualisation in that, as Hall (1992) points out, the very act of identifying ourselves as one thing simultaneously distances us from being something, or someone, else (James 1993). This problematises the task of assessing identity but introduces opportunities for practitioners to be flexible and creative in their assessments. It is thus important for practitioners to embrace the complexity and the often-confounding aspects within identity formation, particularly in children: for to ignore this is to ignore the child's individuality as perceived by the child and significant others in that child's everyday world.

It is of note that identity as an assessment dimension in the Assessment Framework was viewed by workers as considerably more complex than other assessment dimensions, such as health or education. As one practitioner explained:

People aren't well equipped to assess [other] people's identity. I don't think we, as social workers, do anything more than just have an educated guess, and I think that pretty much that is what it is. I guess some people and some young people, their demeanour and behaviour is so consistent and you know, so understandable within their context... Alright, maybe in the context of those people, it's going to be more than an educated guess, but other than that, you know, what do we know?  
*Christian, senior social work practitioner.*

Here Christian explains the difficulties that he feels practitioners encounter when assessing the identities of others. An important feature of the task appears to be the lack of *consistent* evidence to support assessments of identities, coupled with a sense that *people aren't well equipped to assess [other] people's identity*. Chapter Six describes the narrative construction of the identity sections, which is seen to enable

practitioners to tell *their* story of the child, providing the reader with implicit suggestions of what *should* be considered as ‘fact’. In presenting information as ‘fact’ practitioners employ the rhetorical devices of bringing in witnesses, reporting speech, category entitlement, narrativity and coherence to add weight to their assessments. Further, practitioners appear to employ theory within the identity sections not just to aid an understanding of the children’s identities but also to add the ‘taste of a profession’ (Bakhtin 1981:293). As such how practitioners construct children’s identities in Core Assessments also aids an understanding of how practitioners construct and perform their own professional identities.

We saw in Chapter Seven (and again in Christian above), that typically the surface and observable aspects of identity that are available to workers are included within the identity sections. This focus on surface level ways of understanding (Howe 1996), together with their perceived deficiency of skills in this field, means that assessments may be little more than *an educated guess* and lends a view of practitioners as challenged by the interior complexities of identity. This stands in some contrast to how practitioners view other areas of assessment, as Valerie explains:

Oh yeah, health is so easy. I love the health! And it’s great because it’s the first one and it gets you into it, ‘oh yes, I can do this, this is easy!’ When were they born, ‘oh yes they were born healthy’, ‘up to date with immunisations’, oh yes! And I’m thinking ‘oh I can cope with the health’. Emotional [development] I’m thinking, ‘well ok’ and then by identity I’m thinking, ‘oh s\*\*t!’ Identity is a minefield, isn’t it? But it’s a very important one because, I think of the building blocks, and identity will be right bang in the middle. It is, but I think people are very frightened of it. It’s like social presentation, what the bloody hell does that mean?

*Valerie, social worker.*

As such, we can see from Valerie’s account that some assessment dimensions, such as health, are considered as less complex, more *easy* to assess and locate than other dimensions. The more standardised and comfortable areas of assessment are easier to assess with sources of evidence more readily available, whereas other aspects of assessment, such as identity and social presentation, are more subjective, more opaque and multi-dimensional. This makes determining the appropriate sources of evidence problematic for the reasons discussed above and in previous chapters. The difficulty

in assessing the human and social complexity that lies behind key concepts that are intended to inform the assessment has been explored within the social work literature by (Hackett/2003), who focuses on how the Assessment Framework in its own design stages recognised the inherent difficulties in assessing the concept of ‘good-enough parenting’, substituting this notion with the more tangible assessment dimension of ‘parenting capacity’. The assessment of parenting is inherently a value-laden area of child welfare practice (Budd and Holdsworth 1996; Daniel 2000; Jones 2000) and it is argued that parenting capacity is a more helpful construction than the notion of ‘good enough parenting’ which since its introduction by Winnicott (1953) has hitherto been a core aspect of professional language and practice in this area. However practitioners are now encouraged to move away from assessing whether someone’s parenting is ‘good enough’ and produce a broader, more dynamic view of parenting capacity to meet children’s needs within familial, social and environmental contexts (see for example, Jack 2001; Woodcock 2003). This departure from the notion of ‘good enough’ parenting is thought to encourage practitioners to view parenting as a skill that can be enhanced rather than an inherent quality, influenced by the social and temporal space in which children and their families live (Hackett 2003).

The Assessment Framework, by breaking down ‘parenting capacity’ into six core skills<sup>70</sup> enables practitioners to impose boundaries around what an assessment of parenting capacity should consist of, thereby making the assessment task visible and accessible. Although the practice guidance in relation to the assessment of a child’s identities codifies the key elements to include within an assessment, the findings from this research suggest that practitioners use the practice guidance as simply that: a loose guide to practice and not a prescriptive framework (see Howarth 2002; Millar and Corby 2006). Thus, as observed in Chapters Six and Seven, the choice of what to include, frame or highlight within this assessment dimension seemed to varying degrees a matter of practitioner discretion and preference. Lipsky’s concept of the ‘street level bureaucrat’ (Lipsky 1980) emphasises the importance of professional discretion in front line practice and as Evans and Harris (2004: 278) note, professional discretion is essential when ‘the situations they face are too complex to reduce to prescribed responses’. In Chapter Eight it was revealed that other elements of the

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<sup>70</sup> The Assessment Framework considers these skills as: Basic Care, Ensuring Safety, Emotional Warmth, Stimulation, Guidance and Boundaries, and Stability.

practice guidance, such as the child's nationality and religious/spiritual beliefs, were not always included within assessments. Analysis suggested that assessments that included these elements were in the minority and when these aspects of identity were considered within the assessment documents a 'tick-list' approach to their inclusion could be noted, with accounts being oriented to professional interests (see Garfinkel 1974; Goffman 1968a, 1983) rather than how these aspects of identity might affect how the subject children see themselves and significant others. This evident and to some extent predictable divergence between professional accounts of children's identities and those of children and their families cannot be explained by discretion alone and as we see next, it is the very nature of uncertainty in much of social work practice that informs the way organisational artefacts and everyday assumptions about service users are constructed and applied.

### **The existence of uncertainty**

Uncertainty is the domain of the educated professional.  
(Howe 1995:11).

As can be noted from the accounts such as those of Christian and Valerie (above), uncertainty permeated the approach of workers to assessing identity. As with Howe (1995) some practitioners appear to invoke uncertainty in the sense that they conceive of no single 'truth' with regard to the way people see themselves and are seen by others; some practitioners also claim uncertainty about their competence to undertake this aspect of the assessment task. The former position might suggest the worker holds a more reflexive approach than the latter. The former conveys some capacity to grasp different ways of knowing identity, which is likely to offer more value to the assessment process. This more reflexive grasp of uncertainty reflects the complexity in determining and understanding the multi-faceted and dynamic elements of identities that practitioners report. This uncertainty is further exacerbated by the contested terrain of work due to competing interpretations of events that stem from the testimony of various partial and partisan witnesses and where the many different ways of knowing may not be forensically or scientifically based (Parton and O'Byrne 2000; Munro 2002). Thus one of social work's enduring characteristics is its essentially contested and ambiguous nature (Martinez-Brawley and Zorita 1998), yet at the core of its occupational mission is the expectation that social work is 'a making

sense activity' (White 1997: 740). Herein lies an inherent conundrum in the resolution both of a coherent identity for social work, and for the way practitioners assess identities, in that the received ideas that construct discourses of a profession conceptualise knowledge creation as a technical-rational exercise (as in, for example, the professions of consultant, barrister, scientist), whereas there is a growing acceptance that social work operates within the practical-moral realm (Taylor and White 2001; Gillies 2005). As the respondent notes below, the 'contested and ambiguous nature' of social work can affect how practitioners view themselves and the profession:

It doesn't take an awful lot to knock social workers as a profession does it? And it is true that we have a fragile sense of self of us as a profession. *Sioned, Assistant team manager.*

Sioned's account suggests some lack of coherence about social work's identity, noting that workers *have a fragile sense of self of us as a profession*. It is possible that due to the multiple knowledges in social work, practitioners perceive their occupational identities as different from the identities of other professionals. The model that has dominated much theory about 'professionalism' views rigour in knowledge and practice to be the product of technical rationality; typically the application of research-based knowledge to the solution of problems of instrumental choice (Schön 1987, 1991). Thus, in this model professional practice is conceived as deriving its exactitude from the use of describable, testable, replicable techniques evidenced from scientific research and based on knowledge, which is somehow objective, consensual, cumulative and convergent. In this view social work becomes the application of a rigorous social science in the same way as engineering becomes the application of engineering science (Parton 2003). Yet, to consider the resolution by social work of social problems as a technical-rational process excludes the human and emotional aspect of social work and creates knowledge as somehow unproblematic. This is not to say that technical knowledge does not have a place in social work, but that it needs to be placed alongside other knowledges that together allow space for adjustment, negotiation and uncertainty in the pursuit of understanding an individual and the uniqueness of her or his situation.



The uncertain, incomplete and contingent nature of knowledges involved in social work and in the assessment of children's identities in particular, is an area that practitioners highlighted during interviews:

Whether that it is just that we are more comfortable in managing the other sections than we are in managing the identity section I'm not sure. So, you know, do we shy away from that [identity] section because we don't fully understand it? And then that's why the other sections get more focus. *Rebecca, social worker.*

...in terms of identity who would be an expert? (Sigh) I think social workers, if they gather the right information, and if they talk to enough people, um, and if they remain non-judgemental, I think possibly. I wouldn't say we were experts, but I think we have enough knowledge to look at identity. I mean parents and carers, if they know the child well should be able to assess the child's identity. *Olivia, social worker.*

These extracts reveal some of the difficulties practitioners encounter when applying their knowledges in assessing identities. Rebecca suggests that a lack of focus on identity in Core Assessments may reflect the possibility that *we [social workers] don't fully understand it [identity]*. Christian likewise notes (above) that social work practitioners may be ill equipped to assess identities. Olivia, in some respects, supports this claim however she re-positions expertise in understanding identities to include parents and carers. Thus, it would appear that what constitutes appropriate knowledge and defines *an expert* is not discrete and bounded when considering children's identities. Commonly in social work assessments (and as noted in Chapter Six) expert knowledge is perceived as objective, detachable 'fact' used to legitimise social worker preferred accounts (Stanley 2007). However, this suggests a notion of certainty: an essentialist notion of identities and knowledge that does not exist (Milner and O'Byrne 2009). Recognition of the complexities regarding knowledge and identities are pertinent for practice, as Smith (2001) observes social work operates under a political and organisational climate that demands certainty. Further there is an acknowledged drive in the Public Law Outline (Ministry of Justice 2008) to reduce the number of different *experts* instructed within Care Proceedings, whilst re-positioning practitioners as *experts*. Hence, despite organisational and cultural demands for certainty, when it comes to considering identities, conventional

assumptions about what constitutes professional knowledge and authority may not be the only or best predictor of who knows a child's identity best.

As was noted in Chapter Six practitioners appear heavily reliant on developmental and attachment theories in their understandings of children's identities. Although some practitioners do employ alternative theoretical concepts in their assessments of children's identities the selective usage of these concepts continues to restrict the view of children to their immediate familial context. For example, in Chapter Six it was observed how practitioners employ the concepts of coherence (socio-genealogical connectedness) and role modelling (social learning theory) to make implicit inferences as to the appropriateness of the child's parents and/or carers. As such, it was found that the inclusion of these concepts appeared to add little to a more nuanced understanding of the children's identities. It would also appear that the practitioners within this study did not locate their assessment of children's identities within more social based theories, to include reference to how the biological, material and social are negotiated and constructed in the accomplishment of identity (Stryker 1987; Butler 1990; Hogg *et al.* 1995; Segal 2008). The generic omission of this body of knowledge suggests that rather than being located within the individual practitioner, it may be that social workers as a profession do not routinely hold a substantial knowledge about the range of identity theories. For example, as noted in Chapter Three, Erikson's (1963, 1968) ideas can be viewed as the one psychological theory likely to be taught in social work training that deals explicitly with the concept of identity (see Care Council for Wales 2003). However, none of the practitioners within this study recalled this theory; this is suggestive of what Eraut (1994) observes about professional storage and retrieval of formal knowledge, namely that much of it lies dormant once a programme of education is completed. Alternatively, it may be as Taylor (2004) suggests, that practitioners absorb or sometimes relegate formal theory within their day today common sense or practice theory however, prima facie a more fundamental lack of awareness of theories of identities seems at least in part to rest at the root of practitioner uncertainty in this field. As such, it may be beneficial for both trainers and practitioners to explore a wider range of theories in order to appreciate more the complexity of identity and to help promote a more authentic assessment practice.

### **The troubling position of identity within the Assessment Framework**

This study reflects the considerable relevance placed in contemporary social work on assessment and Spratt's (2001) conceptualisation of assessment as social work in practice. It has aimed to unearth the processes of categorisation intrinsic in social work assessment practice, with categorisation seen as 'central to understanding professional action and intervention' (Hall and Slembrouck 2009: 295). Hence, through the analysis of assessment practice we have observed how the identities of clients are constructed (for example, as either 'in need' or not) as well as acknowledging the rhetorical devices employed to reaffirm the professional identities of the practitioners. Throughout this study reference has been made to the distinction between how practitioners talk about their practice and what is presented in the organisational records (as in Pithouse 1998). This anomaly will now be considered in regard to the Assessment Framework itself and the ways in which it structures and orders the process of selection and recording of information.

The Assessment Framework as a standardised assessment tool is structured so that the child is segregated into distinct parts, i.e., health, education, identity. Within Chapter Seven the difficulties that practitioners encounter when considering identity as a stand-alone assessment dimension has been explored, suggesting that practitioners consider a range of other dimensions as constitutive of identity. Indeed it was argued by some practitioners that segregating identity into a separate assessment dimension created a 'false divide':

The identity and emotional behaviour development [dimensions] are often a little bit repetitive, I find, and they can be false divides. And you get, I think you can get a bit tangled up in that there is the false divide and you start, 'well where shall I put this bit?' 'Shouldn't it of been in that bit?' 'Should I repeat it?' And then that's when you get into tick-box, checklist frame of mind, rather than actually looking at the child and trying to give an overview of the child's needs, all of them.

*Sioned, Assistant team manager.*

I think that's part of my difficulty with identity as a stand-alone assessment, um, indicator because it overlaps with so many of the other aspects of our assessment. And I know it's supposed to, because you know, one section of the assessment in process, is suppose to inform the other. It's not like a checklist however. With identity on the occasions when I've thought 'well lets have

more of a stab at this than I normally do' um, I invariably find myself, duplicating information that is already there in the other parts of the assessment anyway.

*So are you happy to duplicate the information?*

Usually I don't. Usually identity is the most cursory, um, part of my completed assessments.

*Christian, senior social work practitioner.*

Although it appears above that assessment is a cumulative *process*, with each assessment dimension *informing* another, these extracts suggest that the workers tend to invoke some ordering process inherent in the categorising nature of the Framework whereby the assessment dimensions are used to reinforce each other rather than reveal new insights. Aas (2004) recognised this phenomenon when considering the use of databases in penal systems demonstrating how standardised systems of recording are employed not to construct identities as unique but rather as a means to assist categorisation. As such, the Assessment Framework may be construed as encouraging practitioners to produce dispersed and fragmented identities for children consisting of a series of characteristics and pieces of information, which are easy to (re)present and compare. Through this process, the individuality of the subject child is in danger of disappearing and we are left with a selection of surface-level pieces of information that provides little scope for in-depth explanation, analysis or understanding (Parton 2008). This opens the possibility for children's individual identities to become standardised, with their individuality often made secondary to their status as children (as in James 1993).

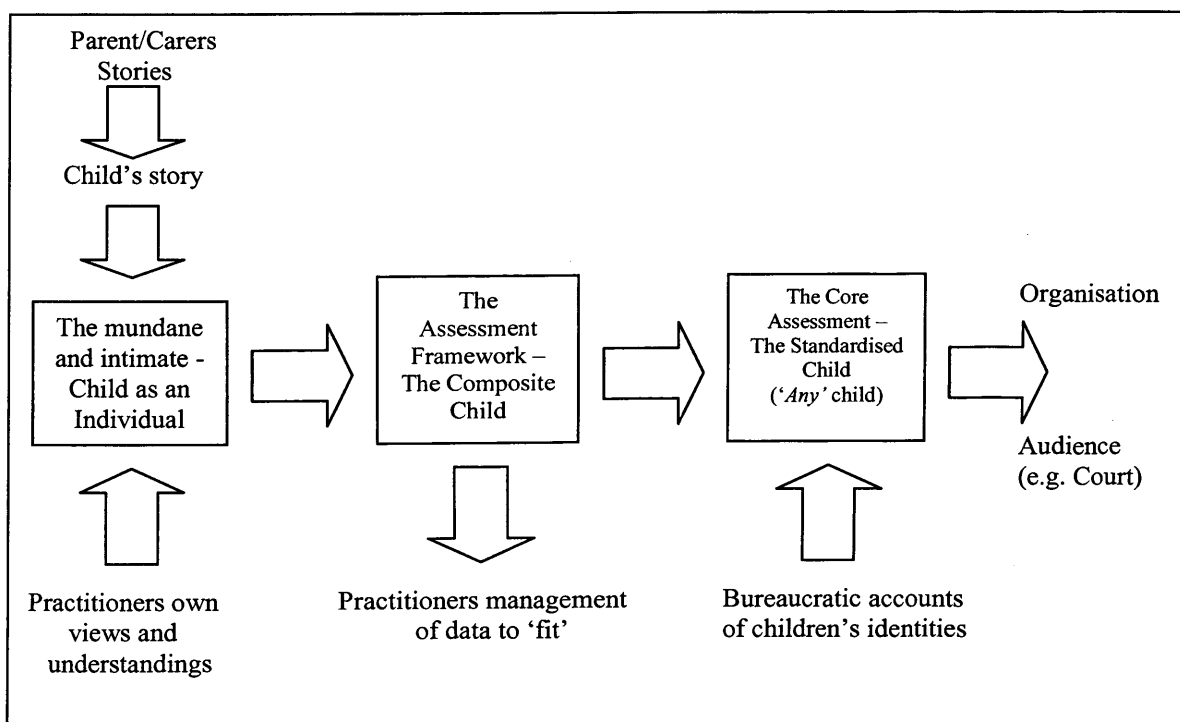
Rather than enabling practitioners' assessments, the separation of the child's needs into distinct assessment dimensions can act to *tangle up* the assessment process, with practitioners focusing more on completing the assessment sections rather than *give[ing] an overview of the child's needs*. Further, the perceived conceptual overlaps between identity and other assessment dimensions can result in practitioners *invariably...duplicating information that is already there in the other parts of the assessment*. It has been noted that some participants may be more pre-occupied with 'getting the job done' and hence construct their assessments to 'fit' the Framework. As Horwath (2002: 203) observes:

... there is a danger that the Assessment Framework will become form-led and interpreted merely as another procedure to follow...making sense of the information ... becomes secondary and the focus on both identifying and meeting the needs of the child is lost.

Not only is it possible that assessments become form-led rather than child focused, but as suggested by the data in this study the Assessment Framework seems to constrain practitioners' accounts of identity when identity is inevitably a multifaceted concept and an element of most, if not all, other child dimensions of the Assessment Framework. Thereby, as in Figure 3 (below), it would appear that practitioners' assessments are subject to a process in which the child's identities are reformulated to 'fit' the Assessment Framework.

As discussed in Chapter Six, practitioners' constructions of the identities of the subject children commence with a desire to learn about the mundane and intimate details of the child's life and are thereby not dissimilar from the focus on the intimate individuality of the person provided by the children, their parents and carers (as in Chapters Nine and Ten). However the practitioners' assessments then appear to become subject to manipulation, and ultimately standardisation, in an attempt to 'fit' this knowledge into the discrete assessment dimensions of the child's developmental needs domain. In order to 'fit' their knowledge of the child into these discrete

**Figure 3: From individualisation to standardisation: the assessment process**



categories it would appear that practitioners find it necessary to disregard their intimate knowledge of the child, as in the following example:

Hayley had remained in the consistent care of her parents until she was accommodated on the [date]. Hayley has developed an attachment to her parents. Hayley is able to recognise Carl [father] and is at ease when in his care. Hayley identifies with White Welsh culture and her present surroundings reflect this.

*Hayley, age 3. Core Assessment 23 (combined assessment).*

Within this identity section, reproduced here in its entirety, a focus on the child's domestic and care-giving environment can be noted. However this is to the exclusion of any characteristic and attribute, which may act to demonstrate Hayley's uniqueness. Rather the individuality of the child is lost, being replaced by routinised understandings about the perceived relationality of children's identities. Thereby we are presented with an assessment that could be describing *any child*, very much exemplifying a notion of the 'standardised child' (White 1998: 269). Thus in this and to varying degrees in other assessments, identity as a distinct dimension becomes a bureaucratic tick-box exercise that discounts the unique and complex identities of children. In this context, the inclusion of identity within the child's developmental needs domain in the Assessment Framework is not particularly helpful to practitioners and seems to add little to assessment as a whole.

### **Further barriers to recognising and rejoicing individuality**

During my analysis of the assessment documents the textual similarities within the identity section of the Core Assessments was notable and perturbing. Few identity sections recorded information that presented the child as an individual with unique characteristics, skills and attributes. Rather, as we have seen in Chapters Six and Seven, the identity sections appeared routinised and recipe-based accounts of *any child's* life vis-à-vis aspects of attachment and immediate family relations. These homogenised accounts did not match what parents and carers expected to read about the child in question. Practitioners recognised this as a feature of their assessment work and in interview some practitioners spoke openly of the *temptation* to provide *bog standard answers* within the identity section:

I always find it quite a struggle because you get the bog standard answers don't you? 'White Welsh, working class, you know, blarr, blarr, blarr'. And sometimes it's difficult, with time you know, to think about more to put in it [identity section].

*Gethin, social worker.*

I think there needs to be more importance placed upon it [identity], you know, instead of, like I'm saying, it just being a bit which you can churn something out on rote and which very often is a temptation. *Frances, social worker.*

It is important to grasp these comments in the context of completing assessments under much pressure and tight time-scales. However, as noted in Chapter Ten, children's accounts of their identities are more complex and individualised than we, as adults, tend to - or may wish to - believe. Children see their 'selves' (as in this study) by reference to social relationships of similarity and difference and through invocations of morality and social agency within their ascriptions of their own identities (James 1993). Yet this view was not evident within the Core Assessments in the data set. While there was, however, evidence of practitioners undertaking creative direct work to ascertain 'the child's views' (see Chapter Ten) there seemed to exist some barrier to practitioners talking to children about their identities. Horwath (2002) describes a lack of time, skills, and collaborative working as barriers to practitioners engaging in direct work with children. Chapter 10 noted such impediments and additional ones as practitioners tended to overlook or discount the child's language and articulation skills, their narrative capacity and the reliability of children's accounts. Present here is a notion of children as incomplete and immature – human becomings rather than human beings (Lee 2001; Christensen 2004). Thus it was noted that practitioners tended to rely on the parents and carers of the child, rather than the child for their views about identity. This adult-centred aspect of assessment can be noted in the following extracts:

I have found in the past is that I am heavily influenced by the parents and their view of the child's identity and that sometimes I can't invest the time to spend with the child to explore these ideas and so, I guess, what I'm putting in my assessments is the views of the parents rather than what the child is actually saying about its identity. *Chantelle, social worker.*

I have tended to work with adults and not with the child. I've listened to the child, in the presence of an adult, but have never made the conscious effort... I have tended to focus more on the

adults and their ability to meet the needs of the child than to listen to the child. *Benita, student social worker.*

Thus, the focus on the child can easily be lost during the assessment process. This loss of focus was further noted by Horwath (2002:199) who identified that whilst the Assessment Framework is depicted as an equilateral triangle too greater focus on, for example, the parents and their parenting capacity can result in the triangle becoming 'lop-sided' with the needs of the child becoming marginalized thereby. This finds support in the view of Connolly *et al.* (2006:60) that 'practice tends to operate from an adult point of view, with little reference to childhood cultures and the need for children to be involved in the processes that concern them'. This raises questions about the adequacy of services that children receive, how children's rights as consumers are conceptualised in practice, and also highlights the challenges that workers encounter when focus is placed on managing risk and deciding on thresholds rather than working therapeutically with children and their families (see for example, Bennett *et al.* 1993; Balloch *et al.* 1998; Huxley *et al.* 2005; Tham and Meagher 2009). Further, and as discussed in Chapter Eight, the exclusion of children's accounts of their own identities is likely to be indicative of how practitioners view children more generally, as discussed below.

### **Enabling children's self-representations**

[If] children in contemporary western cultures are not conceived of as persons – if they have no central or active social role and if their words carry no effective power in the social world – then, inevitably, they must rely on others to represent them, to make representations on their behalf. They are therefore vulnerable to, and often at the mercy of, the very representations which others (usually adults) impose on them and the constructions of their lives that other make (Boyden in James 1993: 71).

The data provided by the children, parents and carers in this study suggests that their active participation within the assessment process was not always encouraged and that some felt they were little more than passive recipients of the assessment process (see Chapters Nine and Ten). As such there is a possibility that the representations of children's identities within this data set, are as Boyden notes (above), worker impositions rather than child-led constructions. As discussed in Chapter Nine, the parents and carers who took part in this study shared a view that the representations of



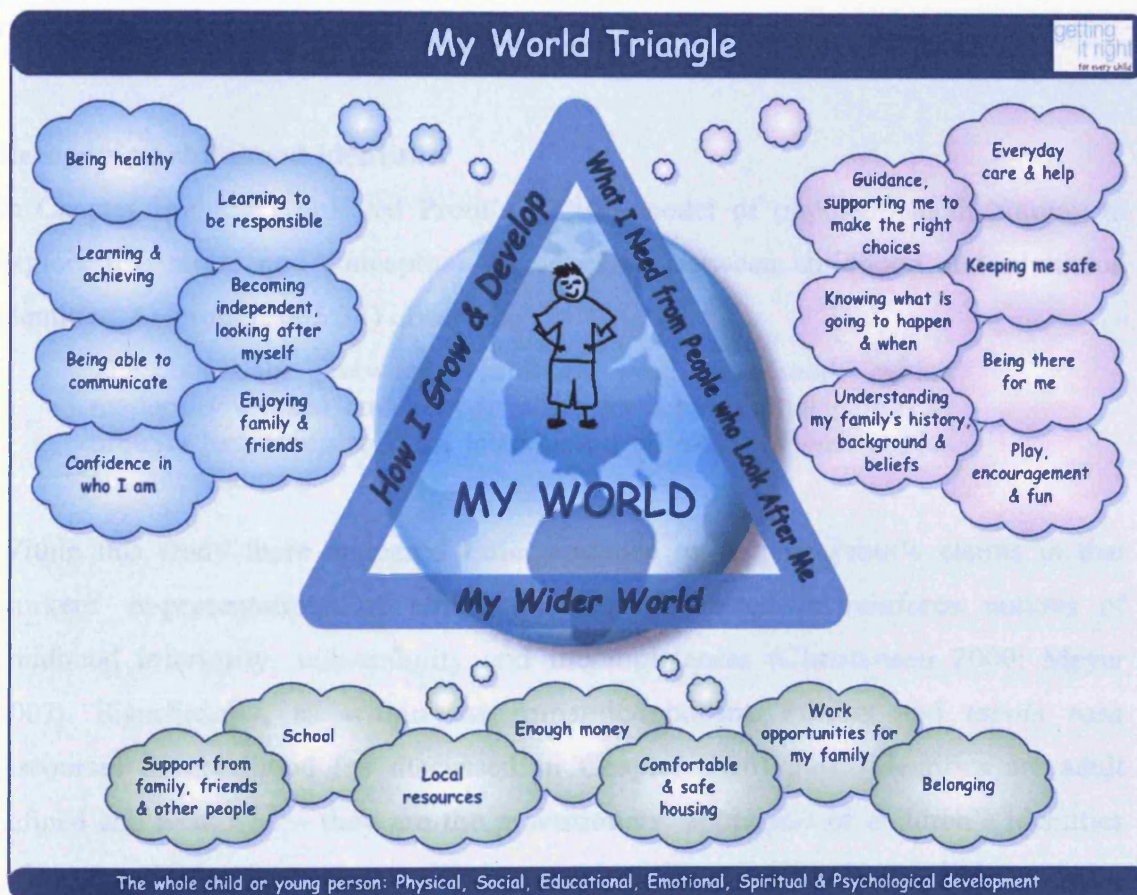
the children's identities within the assessment documents were too generalised, too needs-led, and did not capture the child's unique character. This resulted in parents and carers questioning a practitioner's knowledge of the subject child and the validity of the assessment too. It follows that if practitioners could create more individualising and authentic representations of children's identities within the Core Assessment this might enhance child, parent and carer confidence in the assessment and by extension confidence in the practitioner too. This may also go some way in shifting service users from passive recipients to co-constructors of assessments (as in Parton and O'Byrne 2000).

As demonstrated in Chapter Ten, children can and do create representations of their own identities. All the child participants in this study shared with me their ideas about their identities and what they considered important. The task of engaging the children in this work was not problematic, with half of the subject children undertaking more than one piece of work with me. Further, the information gathered was rich as a source of data about their identities, and much of the data I collected could reasonably be included within a child's identity sections. Time also appeared not to be an issue, as many of the exercises undertaken with the children were brief, and as noted in Chapter Ten, the insights generated by the data greatly out-weighed the time invested in its collection. The experience of engaging with the subject children showed me that children are able, and willing, to share their views about their identities and what they see as important. Thus it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the barrier to engaging children in talk and direct work about their identities lies not with the children, but is located within the practitioners, their work settings and the tools they use.

A key message from this study is that the occupation should re-appraise the assessment process with a view to developing a more child-friendly assessment tool. A useful example of a more individualising tool might be found in the Scottish Government's (2008) 'My World' assessment triangle (Figure 4, below). Within this model the focus is firmly placed on the child, with the assessment domains explained in terms that are easier to address and employ with children and their families than those contained within the Assessment Framework. Here, for example, instead of practitioners structuring their assessments around 'the child's developmental needs',

the *My World* model suggests an exploration of ‘how I grow and develop’. This child-orientated approach implies a more participative focus to the assessment and conjures up a more child driven structure to the process.

**Figure 4: The ‘My World’ Assessment Triangle (The Scottish Government 2008:25)**



Utilisation of the assessment dimensions contained within the ‘how I grow and develop’ domain may assist practitioners in overcoming their perceived difficulties in interpreting and explaining to children, and their families, what identity actually means by providing workers with a source of terms accessible to children and their families. For example, the dimension ‘confidence in who I am’ appears to be the aspect in this framework most compatible with the Assessment Framework’s dimension of identity. Thus practitioners may use this conceptualisation to explore with children, for example, ‘what I do well; what people like about me; what I like about myself’ and so forth in talking to children about their identities. Further, as can

be noted above, the 'My World Triangle' encourages practitioners to explicitly consider a child's spiritual development, which as we have seen in Chapter Seven, is an aspect of identity that practitioners tended to overlook. Thus from this brief exposition we could conceive of the Assessment Framework being adjusted and enhanced in light of alternative assessment tools that widen the assessment gaze and reduce the tendency for workers to construct the child's story for them, albeit such a re-working is out with the aims of this study.

### **Recognising childhood identities**

In Chapter Eight, I employed Prout's (2005) model of oppositional dichotomy to explore if a moral and conceptual divide exists between childhood and adulthood identities. As Prout (2005:34) observes:

The boundary between childhood and adulthood, which modernity erected and kept in place for a substantial period of time, is beginning to blur, introducing all kinds of ambiguities and uncertainties.

Within this study there appeared little evidence to support Prout's claims in that workers' re-presentations of children's identities acted to reinforce notions of childhood inferiority, vulnerability and incompleteness (Christensen 2000; Meyer 2007). Significantly, as within the romantic/innocent, Puritan and *tabula rasa* discourses of childhood (as discussed in Chapter Two) these identities are adult defined and bestowed – they are the practitioners' appraisals of children's identities rather than children's accounts of their own identities. As such, there is little evidence in this study that the ideas imbued in the children's rights and quality of life discourses are deployed by practitioners in their constructions of children's identities. Chapters Six, Seven and Eight have demonstrated that the identities of the children within this data set are simplified constructs, relying upon developmental ideas of children and childhood that allocate a space for children's identities within the constrained environment of the immediate family. By utilising selective and replicable proxies of identities (those of attachment, familial identity and self-esteem) practitioners further simplify the task of assessing identities, resulting in a reductionist account that could, within limits, be 'any' child.

As discussed in Chapter Eight it is suggested that boundaries continue to exist between how adult identities are constructed compared to the subject children. Children's identities, within this study, appear to be constructed in opposition to adult identities, as less complex and sophisticated. When talking about their own, and on occasion the identities of their own children (see Chapter Seven), practitioners were able to provide rich nuanced accounts which stood in some contrast to the bounded, more generalised accounts of the subject children's identities that were presented within the assessment documents. Furthermore, evidence of the routine exclusion of children's nationality, culture and religion/spiritual beliefs acted to provide accounts of their identities that remained located within the primary unit of the family. This, in turn simplified the child's identities, creating relational and narrowly located identities, rather than reflecting, as we saw in Chapter Ten, the wider social and mobile identities that children constructed for themselves.

Chapter Eight also suggested that children's identities are malleable, open to adult shaping and suggestion. The actions of adults, whether parents, carers or social work professionals, are understood to have great influence upon a child's development of a healthy sense of self. When the actions, or inactions, of parents are considered the association is typically cast as negative in its consequences for the child's identities. Whereas although it is known that social work interventions can have negative consequences for some children, the actions of the agency are invariably deemed to be promoting the best interests of the child and are thereby typically excusable and justified. As such, we might argue that underlying assumptions about children's immaturity, vulnerability and naivety act to reinforce the notion that children are unable to fully articulate and construct identities for themselves thereby leaving this function to appropriate adults (Archard 1993, Butler and Williamson 1994a).

Further, as we observed in Chapters Nine and Ten, the subject children, their parents and carers provided descriptions of children's identities with more emphasis on the child's unique individuality than the accounts presented within the assessment documents. We might ask therefore if highly individualised accounts of children's identities are what the social work organisation wants or expects their practitioners to conjure in their assessments. Further social work assessments have a range of audiences and one audience in particular, the court, was seen by the carers and family

members of the subject children to have particular influence upon the ways in which a child's identities were constructed within the assessments. Within Chapter Nine it was suggested that the judicial search at hearings for the 'facts' about a child may also curtail practitioners interest and imagination in straying beyond a more forensically driven assessment of children's identities. These institutional pressures generate a strain towards the 'standardised child' that is likely to permeate a network of legal-welfare bureaucratic contexts where key decisions about children are made (courts, education, health, probation) and is not necessarily confined to social work and its assessment technology (see also White 1998: 296).

We may conclude from this study that greater emphasis should be placed on creating more individualised accounts of children's identities, and hence assessments should be more authentic representations of the subject children. However, for this to happen a transformation is needed in how practitioners think and write about children's identities. As Greig *et al.* (2007:4) remind us, 'it is only when common practices are questioned that change occurs, otherwise the status quo will persist endlessly'. As discussed in Chapters Two and Three there is a wealth of multi-disciplinary theories of childhood and identity development, which practitioners may employ. Chapter Six highlighted how whilst some practitioners were utilising concepts from theories, such as social learning theory and socio-genealogical connectedness, in their accounts of children's identities, there was also much dependence upon developmental theories, most notably attachment theory. This is perhaps unsurprising given the elevated status that attachment theory has been afforded within contemporary social work training, literature and practice (see Howe 1995; Taylor 2004; Barth *et al.* 2005). However it is argued in this study that over-reliance by practitioners on the principles of attachment theory acted to create assessments of children's identities that focused on the child in a relationship with significant others in the family, constructing a narrow 'relational child', to the exclusion of assessments of children's identities that constructed children as active social agents and individuals in their own right.

This is not to say that attachment theory does not have relevance for identity, but rather it is suggested that practitioners in interpreting children's identities via attachment theory should undertake substantial observations of the minutiae of parent and child interaction within a range of settings. It is only through painstaking

observations of this relationship that attachment can be assessed and linked reliably to identity. Thus it is acknowledged that attachment theory can be employed in the assessment of children's identities however the task is more complex than commonly appreciated. Until this is acknowledged, it is likely that the practice of presenting often superficial standardised accounts of children's identities in a context of attachment to parents, carers and other family will continue, and this will be to the detriment of more individualised and authentic representations of children's identities.

### **Findings limitations and suggestions for further research**

There is a need for further research on identity in social work assessment practice specifically because it is an area that poses difficulty for practitioners. There are many different ways to perceive a child's identities and these need examining for their capacity to enhance practice.

A limitation inherent in qualitative research is the inability to generalise from a small sample to a larger population. This study has been undertaken within one small organisational (a local authority child care team) and local community context (urban neighbourhood). As such, the study is culturally and temporally specific. Although the findings are not generalisable, there is the potential for 'transferability and fittingness', that is, the themes in this thesis could potentially be applied to similar populations if they were 'sufficiently congruent' (Lincoln and Guba 1985:124). Qualitative research often adopts what we might call a 'common-sense' view of generalisability such that the reader is left to make up his or her own mind as to how far the evidence collected in a specific study can be transferred to offer information about the same topic in similar settings (Elliott 2005). Given the widespread use of the Assessment Framework in England and Wales it is likely that the study may offer insights that have wider resonance and applicability beyond the context in question.

Another limitation of the findings from this study is that all the parents, carers and subject children who participated were self-selected. Their perceptions of their involvement with social workers and the social work agency will have affected their choice to participate, or not, within this study. Therefore, it is possible that the sample was unrepresentative of a larger universe of clients and in this sense the study findings would be biased accordingly. However, it is in the nature of small scale qualitative

studies such as this that richness of data with its emphasis upon the subjective and the interactive provides a depth of understanding that cannot always be excavated by larger and more representative surveys and samples of participants. It is hoped that this study has succeeded in that regard and that what has been presented here has offered fresh, relevant and valid illuminations of the rarely analysed world of social work assessment practice and that this will, in some small way, contribute to a more reflective and better assessment practice for children in future.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Example of an identity section**

From birth until he was accommodated on the [date], Warren was cared for by his mother, Amanda. Additionally Warren received care from his mother's now ex-partner Mark, with whom she was in a relationship with prior to, and following Warren's birth for the first three years of his life.

On initially being separated from his mother and sister, Warren was visibly distressed by sobbing and crying for his family and asking where they were.

Warren is familiar with his large family network and will often talk to his mother, maternal grandmother and grandfather about additional family members, asking what they are doing and why they are not coming to visit him.

Warren is always happy to see all family members with whom he has contact and displays appropriate physical affection to them individually.

Warren needs to be raised in an environment that values his individuality, whilst acknowledging that he is part of a wider familial and societal unit.

*Warren, age 4. Core Assessment 8 (combined assessment).*

## **Appendix 2**

### **Service User Participant Information Pack**

Date

Address

Dear .....

#### **RE: Participation in research project**

My name is Jane Thomas and I am currently undertaking research at Cardiff University as part of a PhD programme. My research is an exploration of how social workers learn and write about a child's identity in the Core Assessment process. [Dockside] Children's Services have agreed for their local authority to be the case study in my research, and I am writing to invite you to become part of this research.

With your agreement I would like to meet with you to discuss your views on how your social worker learnt about your child's identity and how your child was represented in the Core Assessment. If your child is over four years of age, I would also like to seek your permission for me to talk to your child to gain their views on how their social worker learnt about them.

I have attached to this letter some more information about my research and a consent form for you to complete. It would be very helpful to me if you could return your completed form by the [date] and I have enclosed a stamped address envelop for your ease.

If I do not receive your form by the [date] I will assume that you are happy to be part of this research and will be in touch to arrange a convenient date, time and place to meet with you.

If you wish to discuss my research, and your involvement in this research further, please feel free to contact me on the number stated below. Likewise, if you require further confirmation about this research or myself, my supervisors Professor Andrew Pithouse and Dr Sally Holland can be contacted at Cardiff University on: \*\*\*\*\*.

Your views are an essential part of this research, and points that you raise will be valued and treated with respect. I hope that you agree to take part in this research.

Yours faithfully

Jane Thomas  
PhD Student  
Cardiff University School of Social Sciences  
[Contact details omitted].

## **SERVICE USER PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM**

You are invited to take part in a research project. In the research I will be exploring how your social worker came to know your child and make assessments of his/her identity.

Permission has been granted by the local authority for me to look at all Core Assessment undertaken with a six month period (January to July 2006) by social workers within the [locality team]. As you will be aware your family was assessed during this period.

I would like to meet with you to discuss your views about how your child is represented in the assessment and how you feel the social worker learnt about your child's identity.  
**Your views will not be shared with your social worker.**

If your child is over the age of four, I would also like to seek your permission to speak with your child about how they feel their social worker got to know them. If your child is below the age of four, I will not need to meet with them.

I will also be interviewing your social worker, and will be asking how he/she feels he/she came to know your child's identity.

Your agreement to be part of this study is requested so that the information you share with me can become part of my research.

I would also like to assure you of the following:

Your participation within this study is voluntary.

You may withdraw from the research at any point.

Any information that you share with me that may identify you, or your family, will not be included in the research. Names and other relevant information will be changed.

Your views will not be shared with your social worker or anyone in Children's Services.

Your involvement in this research will not in any way affect the service you or your family receive from Children's Services.

Dear Jane

Please delete as appropriate:

- I have read the information about your research and agree to take part in this research.
- I have read the information about your research and do not wish to take part in this research.
  
- I have read the information about your research and agree for my child to take part in this research.
- I have read the information about your research and do not wish for my child to be part of this research.

Name .....

Signature .....

Date .....

### Appendix 3

#### Assessment period duration (as recorded on assessment document)

Assessment detail:	Start Date recorded:	Completion date recorded:	Not dated:	Duration of assessment period:
1. Robbie		*		
2. Stephanie	Month only	*		
3. Tommy			*	
4. Alfie			*	
5. Emily	*	*		12 weeks
6. Kenton			*	
7. Marley			*	
8. Warren & Nancy	*	*		10 weeks
10. Dominic			*	
11. Ruby	*	*		10 weeks
12. Nathaniel	*	*		18 weeks
13. Paulie		*		
14. Tilly		*		
15. Steve-o		*		
16. J-J		*		
17. Yusef	*			
18. Lili	Month only	Month only		
19. Thierry		*		
20. Leon			*	
21. Jack			*	
22. Hayley & Ryan	*	*		12 weeks
24. Harry & Megan	*	*		12 weeks
26. Chester & Billie	*	*		9 weeks
28. Charlie	*	*		19 weeks
29. Cerys	*	*		8 weeks
30. Jade	*	*		10 weeks
31. Layla		*		
32. Tamsin			*	

## **Appendix 4**

### **Generic Practitioner Interview Schedule**

- These questions have been designed to tease out specific elements of your practice when assessing children's identities.
- A set of 13 generic questions will be used to encourage discussion on your thoughts about assessing identities and in determining *what social work practitioners do when they assess identities*.
- Further, your interview will include questions about the core assessments you have penned which are included in the sample data for this study.
- Examples from practice are encouraged, including examples from other assessments that have not been collated for this study.

#### **Assessing identities:**

1. When assessing children's identities are there components of the child's life and circumstances that you would routinely include in your assessment?
2. If yes, how have you selected these areas as most pertinent to the assessment of a child's identities?
3. If no, how do you decide what to include in your assessment of a child's identities?
4. Children's identities are considered within the child's developmental needs dimension of the National Assessment Framework. Do you think it is useful to isolate identity as an individual assessment component?

#### **Sources of information:**

5. Who do you seek information from when you are assessing children's identities?
6. How do you collect this information? (i.e., interviews, informal discussions, meetings, direct work?)
7. How do you decide what information you wish to include in your assessment of a child's identities?

#### **Sources of evidence:**

8. What sources of evidence do you consider when assessing children's identities?
9. Do you have particular tools that you use to gather this evidence?
10. Which of these sources of evidence do you feel most useful to your assessment of a child's identities?

**Theoretical perspectives:**

11. In your opinion, is there a theory or model of practice that is most helpful in assessing children's identities?
12. Can you provide an example of how you have used this theory to help you understand a child's identities?

**Finally:**

How comfortable to do feel about assessing children's identities?